

A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE NOVELS
OF NATHANAEL WEST

by
Gerald I.^{van} Locklin

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

In the Graduate College
THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

1 9 6 4

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

GRADUATE COLLEGE

I hereby recommend that this dissertation prepared under my
direction by Gerald Ivan Locklin
entitled A Critical Study of the Novels of
Nathanael West
be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement of the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Jew S. Palcutt
Dissertation Director

6/23/64
Date

After inspection of the dissertation, the following members
of the Final Examination Committee concur in its approval and
recommend its acceptance:*

<u>Arthur M. Kay</u>	<u>6/1/64</u>
<u>Marie P. Hamilton</u>	<u>6/1/64</u>
<u>W. Wark</u>	<u>6/5/64</u>
<u>Albert F. Gegenheimer</u>	<u>6/23/64</u>
<u> </u>	<u> </u>

*This approval and acceptance is contingent on the candidate's adequate performance and defense of this dissertation at the final oral examination. The inclusion of this sheet bound into the library copy of the dissertation is evidence of satisfactory performance at the final examination.

STATEMENT BY AUTHOR

This dissertation has been submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for an advanced degree at The University of Arizona and is deposited in the University Library to be made available to borrowers under rules of the Library.

Brief quotations from this dissertation are allowable without special permission, provided that accurate acknowledgment of source is made. Requests for permission for extended quotation from or reproduction of this manuscript in whole or in part may be granted by the head of the major department or the Dean of the Graduate College when in his judgment the proposed use of the material is in the interests of scholarship. In all other instances, however, permission must be obtained from the author.

SIGNED: Gerald A. Locklin

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	iv
CHAPTER	
I. THE MAN BEHIND THE NOVELS	1
II. THE JOURNEY INTO THE MICROCOSM	24
III. THE SECOND COMING	83
IV. THE DISMANTLING OF THE AMERICAN MYTH	151
V. THE DAY OF THE PAINTER	200
VI. CONCLUSIONS	273
REFERENCES	290

ABSTRACT

Nathanael West is no longer a neglected author, but he is still not a fully understood author. This dissertation aims at a clarification of his themes and techniques by means of a close critical reading of his four novels.

Chapter I is a brief introduction to West himself, consisting of a chronological sketch of his life and an analysis of the biographical information provided by James Light, Josephine Herbst, Richard Gehman, and others. The conclusion is that West's pessimism is largely a product of his rejection of his Jewish upbringing, his disappointment at the reception accorded his work, and his isolation.

The next four chapters are devoted to explication in detail of West's four novels. The Dream Life of Balso Snell is a rejection not merely of art, but of life itself. The argument is that life is made meaningful only through spirituality, but that all manifestations of spirituality are shams, usually with physiological causes. The attack proceeds from the particular to the universal with assaults on various artists, philosophers, religions, social customs, academic pursuits, and such shibboleths as home and country. West disparages earlier writers by means of facetious allusions and the parodying of his own models.

The action is constructed according to a negative dialectic. Thesis and antithesis do not yield a synthesis; rather they expose each other as valueless.

The nihilism of Miss Lonelyhearts is similarly absolute. There is no hero, in the sense of a character one might emulate. The supporting characters are all in existential "bad faith"; they cannot respond flexibly to life. Lonelyhearts is more complex, but he too is consumed by a mysticism that is presented as the fruit of homosexuality and sadomasochism. The study shows great concern for the novel's formal perfection. The movement is through exposition to crisis to catastrophe. There is no denouement; West implies that there is never a denouement to death. His characterizations combine the techniques of cartoons and cubism. His imagery is violent, recurrent, unlikely, and surrealistic in the sense that exterior and interior landscapes coincide. Because of his tireless particularization (as in Shrike's extended monologues), his work can be described as both fantastic and realistic.

A Cool Million combines an attack on ultra-Americanism with a parody of the Horatio Alger novel. Because the narrator is, in the manner of Gulliver, a slave to clichés, his viewpoint must be distinguished from West's. This satire on popular art has social as well as literary significance. Occasionally West exercises his

imagination more directly in the creation of an ingenious scene. Major influences are Voltaire, Spengler, Valery, and George Grosz.

The Day of the Locust is the story of the painting "The Burning of Los Angeles." Just as Tod Hackett does preliminary sketches of landscapes, crowds, and individuals, so West desultorily builds towards his panoramic final chapter. West "paints" three aspects of Los Angeles. It is a microcosm in which one may observe the end phenomena of our civilization, a place of deceptions, facades, notably the silver screen, and a real city inhabited by real people. West's characters are extraordinary, but they have sexual frustration in common. The novel also contains a portrait of the artist, Tod Hackett, a man somewhat like West himself.

A brief concluding chapter offers general remarks on the similarities and differences in West's novels, the history of his reputation, his place in American literature, the similarity of his nihilism to that of Louis-Ferdinand Celine, and his relation to our own generation of writers.

CHAPTER I

THE MAN BEHIND THE NOVELS

Nathanael West, surely the most underrated and unjustly neglected American writer since Herman Melville, was born Nathan Weinstein on October 17, 1903, in New York City.¹ At Manhattan's DeWitt Clinton High School, he took no active interest in either the school literary magazine or the school newspaper. He distinguished himself only by his unflinching mediocrity in subjects, and in June, 1920, he left school without graduating. With the aid of an incorrect transcript, which the school has no record of having sent, he gained admittance to Tufts University in September, 1921. He did not immediately reverse the trend of his previous academic endeavors, and in November of that year he was advised to withdraw from Tufts for academic reasons. Nevertheless, the young man soon applied to Brown University, using a slightly different first name than he had at Tufts. According to James Light, the University received a different Nathan Weinstein's transcript, an excellent one, good for

1. James F. Light, Nathanael West: An Interpretative Study (Evanston, Ill., 1961), p. 1. Most of the information in this chronology is gleaned from Light's book, which is the most important study of West to be published to date.

approximately two years of college credits, including many of the sciences which would no doubt have proved most uncongenial to this restless mind. The first day of Spring Semester, 1922, found West a bonafide Ivy Leaguer. He remained at Brown two and a half years and, after an inauspicious first semester, settled down to acquiring the degree, which was awarded in June, 1924.²

After spending a few months at home with his parents and two sisters, West succumbed to that highly contagious virus of the twenties, the lust for Paris. His family consulted and approved the trip. Thus, late in 1924, West sailed for the city of dadaist ashes and surrealist flames. A friend, Jack Sanford, remembers that by 1924 he had been subjected to most of the comic inspirations which West eventually wove into his first novel, The Dream Life of Balso Snell.³ It is more than likely that the novel was largely written during West's stay in Paris.

He returned to New York early in 1926 and worked for a time for his father, a reasonably successful building contractor. In 1927 he switched to assistant manager of the Kenmore Hall Hotel on East 23rd Street, a position that afforded him increased time for reading. Later he moved to

2. Ibid., pp. 4-6.

3. Ibid., p. 30.

the same position at the Sutton on East 56th Street, a more exclusive establishment.

By the summer of 1931, which he spent in the Adirondacks with Sanford, also an aspiring writer, West was already hard at work on his second novel, Miss Lonelyhearts. This same year saw the publication of Balso Snell, which went almost unnoticed by reviewers and public alike. The bizarre fable did, however, sow the seeds of a word-of-mouth reputation among other young literary people. In 1932 he edited three issues of Contact with William Carlos Williams. In the early fall of that year, Josephine Herbst and her husband, John Hermann, followed Williams' suggestion to "look up young West."⁴ They lured him from the Sutton to a weekend idyll in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, where West confided that he had been at work on his new novel for three years. They convinced him to take a leave-of-absence from the Sutton, where he had not been able to work steadily on his novel, and soon after that he moved to nearby Frenchtown, New Jersey, and finished Miss Lonelyhearts.

This book was published in 1933 with an excellent advance critical reception. But a stroke of ill fortune of the type which all young writers fear crippled the sales of the book. Liveright, the publisher, went bankrupt after

4. Josephine Herbst, "Nathanael West," Kenyon Review, XXIII (1961), 621.

the printer had delivered only a few hundred copies to bookstores. By the time a second edition could be arranged under the aegis of Harcourt, Brace, the public had forgotten about the book. Nevertheless, Twentieth Century Fox bought the novel and brought West to Hollywood. He was given little to do on the film (which became a Lee Cobb thriller), and he was released in July, 1933. This same year his one published story, "Business Deal," appeared in Americana, and a Marxist poem appeared in Contempo. In August, 1933, he became Associate Editor of Americana.

West had returned from Hollywood to Bucks County, and it was here that he wrote A Cool Million, or The Dismantling of Lemuel Pitkin, published in June, 1934. The reviewers were kind but sensed a falling off from Miss Lonelyhearts. West was discouraged. During the summer of 1934 he wrote a number of short stories, all of which he considered unsatisfactory, and none of which his agent was able to sell.

Early in 1935 the author who had failed to make any sort of living as a creative writer accepted a hack job with Republic Studios. Although he remained in Hollywood until his death in 1940, none of the pictures on which he worked was of permanent value, and all were to a greater or lesser degree cases of the usual Hollywood multiple authorship. He collaborated in 1936 on Ticket to Paradise, Follow Your Heart, and The President's Mystery,

and adapted Rhythm in the Clouds in 1937. In 1938 he wrote an original screenplay, Born to Be Wild. Moving to RKO and Universal, he worked on Five Came Back, I Stole a Million, Men Against the Sky, and The Spirit of Culver in 1939 and 1940. During this same period he wrote an unproduced play, Even Stephen, in collaboration with S. J. Perelman, and with Joseph Shrank produced Good Hunting, which enjoyed a two-day run on Broadway.

His last novel, The Day of the Locust, set in Hollywood, was published by Random House in 1939, was greeted by mixed reviews, and sold poorly. In April, 1940, West married Eileen McKenney, the original of My Sister Eileen, and his life seems to have been taking a happier turn. But on December 22, 1940, returning with his wife from a trip to Mexico, West missed a stop sign and skidded into another car on wet pavement. He and his wife were both killed in the crash.

Each of West's four novels is unique. There are, however, two qualities shared by all four. All are short on words and long on pessimism. What sort of man was this who wrote "as carefully as if he were chiseling each word in stone with space around it . . . as if he were so composing cablegrams to a distant country, with the words so expensive that not one of them could be wasted, yet never forgetting that the message, at any cost, must be

complete and clear"?⁵ What sort of man was this who exercised such precise and imaginative art in the service of a nihilism so unrelenting that it denied the validity of art itself?

He was, it seems, an amiable person. William Carlos Williams, in his Autobiography, remembers that he was "a firm admirer" of West (and of Miss Lonelyhearts), and calls West "a great guy."⁶ Quentin Reynolds, a class-mate of West's at Brown, worked with him one summer on a construction job. His account is gratifying:

Most of the laborers on the construction job were Italian or Irish. It used to amaze me to see how Pep endeared himself to these ignorant and rather rough characters. They never knew he was the Boss's son; they just liked him. Most college kids in the 1920's were strictly non-listeners. Pep was one of the few who would listen, and when he talked, he talked their language--the language of the Bronx where he too had grown up.⁷

At Brown, West aspired to be an exemplary collegian, introducing new dances and playing the banjo.⁸ In spite of fraternity prejudice against Jews, he was reportedly "welcome at any house on campus."⁹ The Brown yearbook typed him as "an easy-going fellow. . . . He passes his

5. Malcolm Cowley, "Introduction" to Miss Lonelyhearts (New York, 1959), p. 96.

6. New York, 1951, p. 302.

7. Quoted in Light, p. 10.

8. Light, p. 15.

9. Ibid., p. 16.

time in drawing exotic pictures, quoting strange and fanciful poetry, and endeavoring to uplift Casements [the student literary magazine]. He seems a bit eccentric at times, a characteristic of all geniuses."¹⁰

West's natural generosity was remarked by his classmates at Brown and by his friends in later life. Erskine Caldwell did not forget that West allowed him to stay at the Sutton for a token fee during the difficult days of the early depression and that the gesture was made with delicate savoir-donner.¹¹ West rendered this same service to a number of writers. He extended hospitality to James T. Farrell and his wife "when we had no money and no place to go; he did it simply and unobtrusively as though it were a matter of course. When I next saw him in '34-'35, he did not even mention it. He did us this favor without expecting any return or any particular thanks."¹² It was at the Sutton that a penniless Dashiell Hammett finished The Maltese Falcon.¹³

William Faulkner joined West on occasional hunting trips when they were both in Hollywood. The men did not discuss writing, but Faulkner later recalled that West

10. Ibid., p. 31.

11. Erskine Caldwell, Call It Experience: The Years of Learning How To Write (New York, 1951), pp. 110-112.

12. Quoted in Light, p. 65.

13. Ibid., pp. 64-65.

"was an excellent marksman and did his share, and more, in the chores of the hunt."¹⁴

These complimentary descriptions of West contrast strongly with the image of the author that arises from his novels. They indicate, among other things, that West's criticism of life cannot be dismissed as the histrionics of a cantankerous misanthrope. West was by no means personally anti-social; his dark vision had its roots far beneath the surface aspects of personality.

Unfortunately, West's admirable fellowship does not represent the sum total of his personality. His friends did not mistake his geniality for happiness. Robert Coates struck the essence of West's personality and his art: "I think the key to his character was his immense, sorrowful, sympathetic but all pervasive pessimism. He was about the most thoroughly pessimistic person I have ever known."¹⁵ Between the poles of geniality and pessimism, West lived a life of paradoxes which kept his friends perpetually off guard:

No one could satisfactorily explain the many clashing elements in his nature and interests. He despised military men, yet was an authority on armies and strategies from the time of Caesar on ("When he took out a girl, he sometimes spent the evening telling her about some battle of Napoleon's," one friend remembers); he regarded organized religion as a hoax, but was on intimate

14. Ibid., p. 146.

15. Ibid., p. 128.

terms with the structure, organization, and financial condition of the Catholic Church. He was tall, awkward and disarming in appearance, but he dressed with excessive propriety in Brooks Brothers clothes and travelled with an incredible collection of trick luggage. He had an acute feeling for words, but couldn't spell; he hated business and workaday occupations, but was successful as a hotel clerk for several years. Born and raised a city boy, he spent most of his childhood on the Upper West Side in New York (he was a poor athlete, and once disgraced himself in a baseball game by dropping an easy catch that would have meant a win for his side), but when he finally became an outdoor man he was a comic personification of Nimrod. Next to writing, hunting was his main interest, so much so that it continually impinged upon his interest, as evinced by his liberal use of references and metaphors in The Day of the Locust. . . . Josephine Herbst . . . has suggested that hunting assumed such importance in his life because it was a way of finding an uncomplicated kinship with rural people--he got on very well with his neighbors in the country--who were not afflicted with the frustrated desires and guilts indigenous to the sophisticated world in which he customarily travelled.¹⁶

At their first meeting Miss Herbst became aware of the unreconciled extremes in the author's psyche:

This tall slim young man with the warm hand-clasp and infectious smile was the author of Balso Snell, and it was no surprise. His composure, his quick repartee, his sudden silences, resounding like a pebble dropped into a well, suggested the complexities, the contraries to be found in his work. He could hand you a drink with the grace of someone offering you a rose; could stand at ease, listening, with the aristocratic air of detached attachment. He could flash and blaze; then, suddenly, you were looking at the opaque figure of a man gone dumpy, thick, who might be brooding behind a cash register in a small shop on a dull day.¹⁷

16. Richard B. Gehman, "Introduction" to The Day of the Locust (New York, 1950), p. xii.

17. Herbst, p. 621.

There begins to emerge the image of a whirlpool mind, bottomless and violently Protean. Perhaps it was the impossibility of articulating the permanent and dominating traits of West that led his good friend and brother-in-law, S. J. Perelman, to prefer burlesque when called upon to describe the young writer:

To begin with, the author of Miss Lonelyhearts is only eighteen inches high. He is very sensitive about his stature and only goes out after dark, and then armed with a tiny umbrella with which he beats off cats who try to attack him. Being unable to climb into his bed, which is at least two feet taller than himself, he has been forced to sleep in the lower drawer of a bureau since childhood, and is somewhat savage in consequence. He is meticulously dressed, however, and never goes abroad without his green cloth gloves and neat nankeen breeches. His age is a matter of speculation. He claims to remember the Battle of the Boyne and on a fine night his piping voice may be heard in the glen lifted in the strains of "For She's My Molly-O." Of one thing we can be sure; he was seen by unimpeachable witnesses at Austerlitz, Iena, and Wagram, where he made personal appearances through the courtesy of Milton Fink of Fink & Biesemyer, his agents. What I like about him most is his mouth, a jagged scarlet wound etched against the unforgettable blankness of his face. I love his sudden impish smile, the twinkle of those alert green eyes, and the print of his cloven foot in the shrubbery. I love the curly brown locks cascading down his receding forehead; I love the wind in the willows, the boy in the bush, and the seven against Thebes. I love coffee, I love tea, I love the girls and the girls love me.¹⁸

This is nonsense (the description strangely suggests Alexander Pope), but some truth is dimly reflected. West

¹⁸. S. J. Perelman, "Nathanael West: A Portrait," Contempo, III (July 25, 1933), 4.

was a dandy dresser and an expert on Austerlitz, among other battles. His satire may very well have been partly motivated by an inferiority complex of the stereotype which Perelman depicts. But it is more likely that Perelman was simply trying to be as inaccurate and ridiculous as possible. Nevertheless, it is significant that Perelman did not try to state directly what West really was like.

One possible source of self-conflict, a psychological factor which James F. Light repeatedly cites as forming a basis for the disillusionment of West's novels, is his rejection of Jewishness. At Brown, West avoided the "insistently 'Jewish' Jew and had nothing to do with organized Jewish activities on campus."¹⁹ His change of name may or may not have ethnic implications. (His own explanation to William Carlos Williams was that Horace Greeley had said, "Go West, young man," so he did.)²⁰ It is certain that his fiction did not interest itself in the rich possibilities of the Jewish situation in America, which have been so profitably exploited by Salinger, Roth, Bellow, Malamud, and others. Apparently West wanted very badly to belong to one of the Brown fraternities and resented the roadblock posed by his being Jewish.²¹ At

19. Quoted in Light, p. 17.

20. Williams, p. 301.

21. Quoted in Light, pp. 16-17.

any rate, one of the closest of his friends, Jack Sanford, saw West's Jewishness as a constant albatross about his neck:

More than anyone I ever knew, Pep writhed under the accidental curse of his religion. I'm Jewish myself, and I've had many a painful moment . . . but Pep stands at the head of the list when it comes to suffering under the load. So far as I know, he never denied that he was a Jew, and so far as I know, he never changed his faith (it's a joke to call it that, because he had as much faith as an ear of corn). But he changed his name, he changed his clothes, he changed his manners (we all did), in short he did everything possible to create the impression in his own mind--remember that, in his own mind--that he was just like Al Vanderbilt. It never quite came off.²²

Another source of personal dissatisfaction was the young writer's inability to achieve either financial security or a wide reputation as an artist. Sanford attests that "more than anyone I ever knew, Pep was dedicated to his writing."²³ His former roommate, Philip Lukin, confirms (in a paraphrase by James Light) that "West took his writing very seriously. He was consumed by the desire to write well and filled with 'self-torture' . . . by the compulsion to get his visions on paper."²⁴ After West's first book had settled into oblivion, Erskine Caldwell recalls that the neophyte "had not been embittered

22. Light, p. 132.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid., p. 29.

by the notices of the reviewers, but he was puzzled by their unsympathetic attitude and by the lack of understanding of his purpose."²⁵ After the publication of The Day of the Locust, a book such as any author might reasonably expect to be handsomely received by critics and public alike, West wrote to F. Scott Fitzgerald: "So far the box score stands: Good reviews--fifteen per cent, bad reviews--twenty-five per cent, brutal personal attacks--sixty per cent."²⁶ In a letter from Hollywood to Edmund Wilson, West explained:

I once tried to work seriously at my craft but was absolutely unable to make even the beginning of a living. At the end of three years and two books I had made the total of \$780 gross. So it wasn't a matter of making a sacrifice, which I was willing to make and still will be willing, but just a clear cut impossibility . . . I haven't given up, however, by a long shot, and although it may sound strange, am not even discouraged.²⁷

This undaunted confidence is not bluff, since West at that time was blocking out The Day of the Locust. Nevertheless, it is clear that West did suffer from his inability to prove himself, so to speak, as a writer.

No doubt West's Jewishness and his unrewarded writing contributed to his pessimism. There is also evidence that he was bothered by sexual frustrations of some sort or, at least, by an uncomfortable attitude towards sex.

25. Caldwell, p. 110.

26. Quoted in Gehman, p. xi.

27. Gehman, p. xviii.

There was no doubt in the mind of Mrs. Richard Pratt that he was

a deeply disturbed person, aware of the repressed violence in himself and others, fascinated by the macabre and offbeat. He was monopolized by a possessive mother and quite unable, at the time, to free himself from this thralldom. Certainly he was a lonely man and quite often full of despair. What saved him was that he was immensely alive, full of curiosity about everything. His strong sense of the droll and the ironical colored all his thinking.²⁸

West's relationship with his family was an all too typical one. His mother was a strong-willed materialist, who had no sympathy whatsoever for his literary ambitions. Even his first three published books failed to sway her, mainly because they did not represent any income to speak of. She visited West for long periods of time and he respected her almost to the point of fear. West's father was meek and gentle, and West liked him very much. Light has suggested a link between West's rejection of Jewishness and his attempts through art to reject his mother. He bases this analysis on Jungian psychology.²⁹ For our present purposes it is enough to note that West was apparently the victim of the classic possessive, domineering mother and that no psychologist has recommended this familial situation as conducive to vigorous mental health.

28. Quoted in Light, p. 109.

29. Light, pp. 52-53.

West was not close to one of his sisters who resembled his mother. But he idolized his sister Laura to such a degree that all other women paled in comparison. At Brown he swore by Odo of Cluny's description of woman as a saccus stercoris, and was wont to defend the double standard.³⁰ He seems to have exalted his sister at the expense of womankind. In the light of his fiction, this misogyny cannot be dismissed as a collegiate pose.

West did not marry until the last year of his life. Josephine Herbst points out that "though he wasn't a man without women, none of his friends mentions any romantic love affair in Light's account of him." She reaffirms that "he had closer ties to his family than any of the other young writers of the period whom I knew."³¹ At one time West carried in his pocket for three years a marriage license with which he hoped to bind himself to Alice Shepard, the "A. S." to whom Balso Snell is inscribed. One cannot help wondering how the girl interpreted the dedication of this singularly anti-romantic book. At any rate, religious and financial difficulties eventually killed the engagement.

In summary: West was in his personal relationships a lovable if eccentric man of many faces. Those

30. Ibid., p. 24.

31. Herbst, p. 628.

qualities which repel so many readers of his books did not seriously threaten his friendships. But he was also a victim of profound mental suffering, tormented by his rejection of Jewishness and the subsequent lack of security, by the lack of popular and, in some cases, critical enthusiasm for his work, and by his uncomfortable relations with his mother. And his suffering ran in even deeper currents, possibly augmented by sexual unfulfillment or, at least, a profound aloneness. After his ideal marriage in the last year of his life, "West noted that he was no longer interested in pessimistic writing; in the future--and not just because such art sold--he planned to write simple, warm, and kindly books, one of which he had already planned."³²

This sketch of West would not be adequate without some mention of his reading. He was an insatiable reader and the lines and colors of his own imagination take on a more distinct cast when viewed in the context of his participation in literary history.

Information concerning West's reading commences at the age of ten, at which time he was burrowing or buried, as the case may be, in the pages of Tolstoy. By the age of thirteen, he had also discovered French literature,

32. Quoted in Light, p. 182.

Madame Bovary in particular.³³ The French and Russians remained favorites of West's, and Flaubert and Dostoevsky, whom West never ceased to re-read, influenced his novels noticeably. By the time he reached Brown, however, his taste had shifted to Salammbô and The Possessed. Dr. Wilhelm Stekel has remarked on the extremely sadistic tone of these two books.³⁴ West's own novels are certainly rife with scenes of sadistic cruelty; for example, the sacrifice of the lamb and the interrogation of the clean old man, both from Miss Lonelyhearts.

James Joyce was soon added to the trinity of masters. West read transition avidly and had a special reverence for the Irish writer's narrative experimentation.³⁵ In the desultory manner of an Ivy League Coleridge, West wandered through the diabolism of Huysmans and Eliphas Levi; Celtic Mysticism and such contemporary Celts as Padraic Colum, AE, and James Stephens; Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Arthur Symons, and other symbolists; Church history and hagiography; the dry ice of Mencken, Nathan, and the Smart Set; the novels of one of the professors at Brown, Percy Marks; and

33. Light, p. 8.

34. Wilhelm Stekel, Sadism and Masochism: The Psychology of Hatred and Cruelty, II, trans. by Louise Brink (New York, 1939), p. 369.

35. Quoted in Light, p. 28.

miscellaneous stragglers, such as Machen, Saltus, Beerbohm, and France. He published an essay on Euripides, heavily indebted to the Dionysian cultism of Huneker, in the school literary magazine, Casements.³⁶

He arrived in Paris in 1924. The fires of dadaism had gone out after the debacle of Breton's projected "Congrès International pour la Détermination des Directives et la Défense de l'Esprit Moderne" in 1922. But the spirit of nihilistic laughter still endured and all the notions of the movement were accessible to the young American. Moreover, in 1924 Breton published the Surrealist Manifesto. West's adaptation of dadaist and surrealist attitudes and methods will be discussed in later chapters. West met Hemingway in Paris. One might expect that West would find much in common with his fellow writer and outdoorsman, but instead Hemingway "impressed him as something of a poseur who talked at length, like a character from The Sun Also Rises, about Spain and the fishing and the bulls."³⁷

West returned to the States and set about at once initiating his friends into the new literature. Jack Sanford recalls some of the names that he first heard from West: "T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound . . . Walter Pater, a young guy named Hemingway, Max Beerbohm, Aubrey Beardsley,

36. Light, pp. 24-29.

37. Ibid., p. 62.

Picasso, Modigliani, Sherwood Anderson, Joyce, Kafka, William Carlos Williams."³⁸ From his vast reading West eventually distilled certain original ideas on the novel:

Lyric novels can be written according to Poe's definition of a lyric poem. The short novel is a distinct form especially suited for use in this country. France, Spain, Italy have a literature as well as the Scandinavian countries. For a hasty people we are too patient with the Bucks, Dreisers, and Lewises. Thank God we are not all Scandinavians.³⁹

He had also been reading widely in psychology and suggested that Freud could not teach human nature to the modern writer, but that the collection of case histories could be used as a modern Bullfinch.⁴⁰ Among the more important authors in his mature reading were Spengler and Valery.⁴¹

West was a writer among writers and he must have assimilated a good deal from the numerous writers with whom he rubbed elbows. Among his literary friends and acquaintances were Frank O. Hough, Quentin Reynolds, Robert Coates, Wells Root, S. J. Perelman, Dashiell Hammett, I. J. Kapstein, Josephine Herbst, John Hermann, Alexander King, William Carlos Williams, James T. Farrell, Erskine Caldwell, Mathew Josephson, Malcolm Cowley,

38. Jack Sanford, quoted in Light, p. 63.

39. Nathanael West, "Some Notes on Miss Lonely-hearts," Contempo, III (May 15, 1933), p. 1.

40. Ibid.

41. Quoted in Light, p. 127.

Edmund Wilson, William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and, briefly, Hemingway. And if he knew these people, he must have known many more through them.

The material and spiritual conditions of the twenties and the thirties provided ample food for West's pessimistic nature. The moral scruples mentioned earlier could not help being troubled by the laxness of the Jazz Age. In the thirties West associated with various protest groups and moved always further to the left. He was a contributor to and later an associate editor of the nihilistic Americana, edited by Alexander King, George Grosz, and Gilbert Seldes. The first issue produced this manifesto:

We Are Not REPUBLICANS Because . . .

the present office holders have dismally failed in leadership and intelligence and because the moneyed oligarchy that runs and ruins this country is animated by stupid and shameless greed best exemplified by the Republican party. As for Mr. Hoover personally, we rest content by presenting the record of his flabbiness and incompetence.

We Are Not DEMOCRATS Because . . .

the Democratic party is no less corrupt than the party in power and is simply striving to glut its vicious and insatiable appetite at the public money trough. As for Mr. Roosevelt personally, we consider him a weak and vacillating politician who will be an apt tool in the hands of his powerful backers.

We Are Not SOCIALISTS Because . . .

the erstwhile sentimental liberalism of the Socialists has degenerated to the bourgeois mouthing of their spokesman, Norman Thomas.

We Are Not COMMUNISTS Because . . .

the American Communist party delegates its emissaries to bite the rear ends of policemen's horses and finds its chief glory in spitting at the doormen of foreign legations. We are also opposed to Comrade Stalin and his feudal bureaucracy at Moscow.

We are Americans who believe that our civilization exudes a miasmatic stench and that we had better prepare to give it a decent but rapid burial.

We are the laughing morticians of the present.⁴²

In February, 1933, West published "Christmass [sic] Poem" in Contempo:

The spread hand is a star with points
The fist a torch
Workers of the World
Ignite
Burn Jerusalem
Make of the City of Birth a star
Shaped like a daisy in color a rose
And bring
Not three but one king
The Hammer King to the Babe King
Where nailed to his six-branched tree
Upon the sideboard of a Jew
Marx
Performs the miracle of Loaves and fishes

The spread hand is a star with points
The fist a torch
Workers of the World
Unite
Burn Jerusalem.⁴³

Although the poem strikes one as forced and cold, the diction is precise. Moreover, it is obvious that West at least wanted to sympathize emotionally with the Movement.

42. Quoted in Daniel Aaron, Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism (New York, 1961), p. 175. Reprinted from Americana, I (November 1932).

43. Contempo, III (February 21, 1933), 4.

This sympathy landed him in jail overnight in 1935 as a result of picketing a department store. The experience was nearly traumatic.⁴⁴ On November 13, 1936, West, "the most talented writer of them all," spoke on "Makers of Mass Neuroses" at the Western Writers' Congress, an activity of the League of American Writers.⁴⁵

One last, but very important, influence must be mentioned. West had a lifelong interest in painting. This was, of course, a sine qua non among the surrealists with their cult of the image. He had spent a good deal of time drawing while in college and among his most prized possessions was a collection of Max Ernst prints.⁴⁶ The pictorial technique is prominent in all of West's novels, and in The Day of the Locust it is raised to the level of a mystique. Among the painters mentioned in The Day are Winslow Homer, Thomas Ryder, Goya, Daumier, Picasso, Salvator Rosa, Francesco Guardi, Monsu Desiderio, Janvier, and Hogarth. West's tour of duty as a screen writer added the dimensions of time and the moving perspective to his already acute eye for still life.

This brief portrait of the man behind the novels has attempted merely to create a living background for the

44. Quoted in Light, p. 114.

45. Aaron, p. 307.

46. Quoted in Light, p. 95.

study of the works themselves. The aim of this dissertation is simply to achieve as complete an understanding as possible of the four novels of Nathanael West. The following chapters will concentrate on a close examination of the works.

CHAPTER II

THE JOURNEY INTO THE MICROCOSM

Even today, when Nathanael West's star seems well into its ascendant (negative critics may claim that it has passed its apex), little attention is paid to The Dream Life of Balso Snell. Malcolm Cowley, an admirer of Miss Lonelyhearts and The Day of the Locust, dismisses Balso Snell and A Cool Million as "barely worth reprinting."¹ A. M. Tibbetts, who complains that all of West's novels are presently overrated, brands the two lesser works as "universally condemned."² He is not altogether accurate. The reviewer in Contempo perceived a talent far above par in a work that certainly did not warrant "condemnation":

This is a first novel. And, considering the usual unevenness of first novels, Mr. West has effected a splendid and craftsmanlike book. Perhaps it would be rather impertinent to call this facile, buoyant book a novel, but whatever the author ordains to baptize his work it is, not too superlatively, a distinguished performance in sophisticated writing. True, there is nothing tremendously significant in it either of style or technique. Yet there is a suavity of phrase and execution in The Dream Life of Balso Snell that

1. Malcolm Cowley, "Introduction" to Miss Lonelyhearts (New York, 1959), p. iii.

2. A. M. Tibbetts, "The Strange Half-World of Nathanael West," Prairie Schooner, XXXIV (1960), 8.

makes for excellent reading. It is with enthusiasm that we look for Mr. West's next work.³

There is a certain unintended propriety in the sandwiching of this review between reviews of In Defense of Sensuality and Adventures in Genius. Genius and sensuality, both of an exotic breed, abound in Balso.

A few others are willing to admit a fondness for the book. S. J. Perelman betrays his affection for Balso when he terms it "Goyesque,"⁴ as does Alan Ross in his imaginative summation of it as "a sneer in the bathroom mirror at Art."⁵ James F. Light is cautious in his evaluation, but he admits that "Balso Snell is an intriguing book for anyone interested in Nathanael West, just as This Side of Paradise is important for anyone who wishes to understand Scott Fitzgerald."⁶

The novel does not deserve either neglect or disparagement. It is one of the most complex books this side of James Joyce, and its complexity is coherent, not chaotic. West was a widely read young man. In his first

3. V. N. G., "Books in Review," Contempo, I (August 21, 1931), 3.

4. In an interview with Harvey Breit, "Go, West," New York Times Book Review, LXII (March 24, 1957), 8.

5. Alan Ross, "The Dead Center: An Introduction to Nathanael West," in The Complete Works of Nathanael West (New York, 1957), p. xii.

6. James F. Light, Nathanael West: An Interpretative Study (Evanston, Ill., 1961), p. 52.

book, he reacted to his reading in three ways. He rejected the ultimate value of literature; he laid the foundation for his novel in allusions of an unusually destructive sort, and he put into practice a number of the lessons he had learned from his favorite authors, while succeeding in creating an unmistakably original work. I hope to show that the novel, when its originality is properly understood, is of considerable merit in its own right as well as being an indispensable aid in understanding West's later novels.

The novel is divided by spacing in the text into seven chapters. Each of these is apt to break down into two or more relatively discrete episodes. True to its title, the novel is a dream from start to finish. There is no frame of waking reality. The reader is initiated into the unconscious mind of Balso Snell, contemporary American bard and bawd. Balso's unconscious is externalized as the Trojan Horse, into which he journeys by way of the alimentary canal. Simultaneously, he and the reader explore the bowels of human nature. For Balso's dream, like Earwicker's, is a microcosm of humanity. The adventures of the journeyer Balso are of very little interest as they pertain to that caricature alone. But the entire contents of the dream, when spread out as a mural of condensed types, becomes a very interesting and original generalization about man himself and the total

condition which he calls "life." Balso's unconscious is both personal and collective.

The inscription sounds the keynote of this novel and of West's life and work: "After all, my dear friend, life, Anaxagoras has said, is a journey."⁷ This not only places the novel in the historical context of the picaresque novel, but it articulates the philosophical basis from which the genre takes its validity and effectiveness. If life itself is a journey, then what more realistic structure than the picaresque?

Although Balzo Snell shares the linear structure and profane episodes of such novels of the road as Lazarillo de Tormes, The Scavenger, and The Adventures of Augie March, its differences from them are at least as important as its similarities. The most obvious difference is the fantastic, uncharted course that Balso pursues. Wandering among the ruins of Troy, he comes upon the famed horse. Being a poet himself, he feels it incumbent upon him to inspect more closely this relic of the great epics. Unfortunately, "the mouth was beyond his reach, the navel proved a cul-de-sac" (p. 3). He is obliged to travel third class, up the remaining orifice. "O Anus Mirabilis!" comments the lyrical narrator (p. 3).

7. The Complete Works of Nathanael West (New York, 1957), p. 2. All further references to West's novels are to this edition and are incorporated into the text.

This allusion to Dryden's poem is neither the last nor the least of the book's puns. Balso comes at once upon wall scribblings. Engraved in a Valentine heart is a monument to self-love and literary pretentiousness, the Emperor Nero's dying gasp, "Ah! Qualis . . . Artifex Pereo!" (p. 4). Balso responds with "O Byss! O Abyss! O Anon! O Anan!" (p. 4). He re-inforces this word play with a parody of the invocation of Stephen Daedalus: "O Beer! O Meyerbeer! O Bach! O Offenbach! Stand me now as ever in good stead" (p. 4). Balso feels right at home among these echoes from the literary past and he is further reassured by identification with such heroes as "the one at the Bridge, the Two in the Bed, the Three in the Boat, the Four on Horseback, the Seven Against Thebes" (p. 4).

West has wasted no time in proclaiming his book a portrait of the artist turned inside-out. This technique of announcing the multiple motifs of a novel on the first one or two highly compressed pages is precisely that of James Joyce. The first two pages of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man foreshadow all the themes of the book.⁸ The epigraph to Balso introduces, ironically, the

8. The epigraph, "Et ignotas animus dimittit in artes," establishes the parallel between the ancient and modern Daedaluses and isolates the basis for the parallel --their singleminded dedication to arcane skills. The source of the quotation is Ovid's Metamorphoses. Stephen's maturation is also a sequence of metamorphoses. Furthermore,

ignoble journey of the protagonist, the journey of the reader into the microcosm of humanity's dream life, and the life-long search of West for some loophole in his ironclad nihilism. The mention of Anaxagoras prepares us for the problem of the One and the Many, the metaphysical question which has occupied philosophers in one form or another since the pre-Socratics and which occurs in bizarre contexts in Balso.

the Nighttown episode in Ulysses, if that book may be considered a continuation of A Portrait, is constructed from surrealist metamorphoses.

The hypersensitivity of Stephen's perceptions, which will set him apart from other men, is implied in his distinguishing the warmth followed by coldness of a wet bed, the queer smell of an oilsheet, and the smell of his mother, which is "nicer" than the smell of his father. One remembers that Ulysses is to some extent the tale of Dedalus's search for a spiritual father. The artist's earliest memory is of being told a story, and he recalls the words of the songs that were sung to him and that he was taught to sing. He remembers the rhythm of the hornpipe to which he danced. He was, in other words, born to be a solitary singer.

The political crises of the book are pre-signified by Dante's two brushes, one for Michael Davitt and one for Parnell. The very name of the nurse signifies that Stephen was nursed at the bosom of the Church. His later defiance of God and country corresponds to his refusal to apologize to a playmate. Instead, his word-consciousness forms the admonitions of his mother and nurse into the ditty:

Pull out his eyes,

Apologize,

Apologize,

Pull out his eyes.

The structure of the ditty is the basic rhetorical arrangement of chiasmus. All in all, the first pages of the novel thoroughly prepare the reader for the life of the "Martyr-Artist," as Stephen's name may be translated.

The Trojan Horse is an apt symbol for the alleged dual nature of man because it is an animal, but it is also an ingenious creation of the mind. It is mythical, and it suggests Homer, the flower of Greek culture.

Balso, as a poet, should be a paragon of man's spiritual life. His name, however, suggests something different, either "the balls of Snell," or "the smell of balls." West seems to have intended the association of "Snell" and "smell" when he chose the name.⁹ The novel argues that art is not a sublime excretion, but simply excrement. The invocations to the Muse are burlesqued. Nero, an artist by self-designation only, is one of the first artists to leave his mark on Balso. From then on, all the characters Balso meets are artists, with one exception (and he is an aesthetician).

West then has not simply parodied Joyce; he has imitated him in a very thorough manner. The first section launches the novel's attack on the apotheosis of the artist and the deluded use of art as a hermetic world of its own, a refuge from the material reality of life, a self-contained system of meanings and values with no reference to the world from which the raw materials of art are drawn. The "real" world, from which people are always trying to escape, is painted in images of vulgarity and

9. Light, p. 30.

abnormal sexuality, here the only too obvious anal eroticism which Balso's dream betrays.

West's unusual gift for startling imagery and diction is evident even in these first published pages of his work: "the navel proved a cul-de-sac," "along the lips of the mystic portal," "he entered the gloom of the foyer-like lower intestine" (pp. 3-4). His "particular kind of joking" is also indulged in. Sometimes, of course, West is funny in a way that can be universally appreciated. At other times, however, his humor seems purposely designed to offend the reader by its silliness or vulgarity or obscenity or blasphemy. This is the humor which West learned from the dadaists, whose "saint," Jacques Vache, defined humor as "a sense of the theatrical and joyless futility of everything, when one knows."¹⁰ West's humor often provokes an initial grin or grimace, rather than a smile or belly laugh, and its cumulative effect is one of purgation or inoculation, rather than ephemeral amusement. Neither West nor the dadaists felt any obligation to whet an audience's palate with comic relief. They contemned the theory that art is to be enjoyed, and preferred to wreak their art upon their audiences.

As evidence that Balso is comfortable only in the web of literary associations, the minute that he is left

10. Quoted in Marcel Raymond, From Baudelaire to Surrealism (New York, 1950), p. 271.

alone with nothing to read and no one to reply to his
 invocations, he feels it necessary to compose a song:

Round as the Anus
 Of a Bronze Horse
 Or the Tender Buttons
 Used by Horses for Ani

On the Wheels of His Car
 Ringed Round with Brass
 Clamour the Seraphim
 Tongues of Our Lord

Full Ringing Round
 As the Belly of Silenus
 Giotto Painter of Perfect Circles
 Goes . . . One Motion Round

Round and Full
 Round and Full as
 A Brimming Goblet
 The Dew-Loaded Navel
 Of Mary
 Of Mary Our Mother

Round and Ringing Full
 As the Mouth of a Brimming Goblet
 The Rust-Laden Holes
 In Our Lord's Feet
 Entertain the Jew Driven Nails (pp. 4-5).

The desire for ideal Unity is expressed here in
 Balso's preoccupation with such circular objects as ani,
 buttons, wheels, brass rings, the potbelly of a satyr, the
 structural principle of Giotto's painting (medieval unity,
 as personified for Henry Adams in the Virgin), a goblet, a
 navel, a mouth, stigmata, and nails.¹¹ Even as he longs
 for a unifying God or, at least, an Earth Mother, Balso

11. Light, p. 43. It should also be noted that
 West's art, like Giotto's, is that of fresco, the art of
 surfaces and detail realism, rather than oils, the art of
 overall perspective and deep emotional textures.

reduces the deity to physical reality by the insistence of his imagery. West also takes this opportunity to sneer at both Christianity and Judaism.

Balso considers a number of titles for his ode, the most successful of which are "Anywhere Out of the World, or a Voyage Through the Hole in the Mundane Millstone," and "At Hoops with the Ani of Bronze Horses, or Toe Holes for a Flight of Fancy" (p. 5). These could serve as subtitles for the whole novel. The first (half of which is the title of a Baudelaire prose-poem) indicates a real despair at the limitations of material existence. The second is more in the mood of a dadaist joke. The combination of genuine ennui and sophisticated detachment contributes to the novel's unusual atmosphere.

Balso is not relieved by "the gaiety of his song" (p. 5). His fears are aggravated by his recollection of the Phoenix Excrementi, who "eat themselves, digest themselves, and give birth to themselves by evacuating their bowels" (p. 5). The fertile imagination of Balso invented these people while he lay in bed one Sunday afternoon. This is the first instance of erotic daydreaming, a preoccupation of many West characters. The Excrementi may be considered, as Light asserts, as emblem of the hopeless,

circular sameness of a monistic universe.¹² Or they may represent the vicious circle of the artistic process, in which the imagination feeds upon its own creations and from these gives birth to further fictions. Or it may simply be an image of the life process, in which everything is prime matter under different forms. Balso's infantile cloacal concept of birth is betrayed by his confusion of evacuation and generation.

Balso bursts forth in another series of exclamations that seem to parody the artist's hackneyed use of flowers, wells, fountains, and so forth, as life-symbols. He attracts the attention of a tour guide. Balso quotes one of his own senseless aphorisms in order to prove that the poete maudit is beyond the pale of social authority. The guide, in the name of the Old World, welcomes Balso as an envoy from the New World. The two fail to see eye to eye. The guide ineptly praises America's premier contribution to world culture, the automatic water-closet. Balso retaliates by pricking the guide's illusion that a decayed pile, which they pass in the canal, is a Doric sculpture. He proceeds to advance as incontrovertible proof of America's cultural hegemony Grand Central Station, the Yale Bowl, Holland Tunnel, and Madison Square Garden. The guide falls back on platitudes about the hallowed

12. Light, p. 43.

ground of the ancients and then turns abruptly upon Balso with the twentieth-century formula heard on both sides of the Atlantic, "If you don't like it here, why don't you go back where you came from" (p. 6). Just as abruptly, he remembers the correct relationship of guide to tourist and offers to tell Balso a colorful folk tale. The tale "Visitors" concerns Appolonius of Tyana, a contemplative in whose posterior resided a snake. Except as an image of anal eroticism the tale is senseless. Perhaps for that very reason, Balso considers it a perfect old-world fable. He is not so taken with the guide's encores, which include an aphorism attributed to the Burning Bush, "A hand in the Bush is worth two in the pocket" (pp. 6-7).

The truce between the two is broken when Balso realistically calls a hernia a hernia. Seeing the guide's discomposure, he tries to advance a theory of non-referential word music:

"Hernia," he said, rolling the word on his tongue. What a pity childish associations cling to beautiful words such as hernia, making their use as names impossible. Hernia! What a beautiful name for a girl! Hernia Hornstein! Paresis Pearlberg! Paranoia Puntz! How much more pleasing to the ear . . . than Faith Rabinowitz or Hope Hilkwitz" (p. 7).

Unfortunately, Balso has not only reduced to absurdity the Symbolist aesthetic of poetry as music, but he has also piqued the guide's racial inferiority complex. "'I am a Jew!'" he cries, "'and whenever anything Jewish is

mentioned, I find it necessary to say that I am a Jew. I'm a Jew! I'm a Jew!" (pp. 8-9). Balso's reply is equally trite and irrelevant: "'Oh, you mistake me. . . . I have nothing against the Jews. I admire the Jews; they are a thrifty race. Some of my best friends are Jews'" (p. 9). He realizes that he is mouthing inanities, but he cannot leave well enough alone. Hoping to disperse the smoke-screen of habitual formulae with a single breath of truth, Balso succeeds only in quoting the most gauche, offensive aphorism available: "'The semites . . . are like to a man sitting in a cloaca to the eyes, and whose brows touch heaven'" (p. 8). Balso's imagery, of course, runs to cloaca on all occasions.

Both the Jews and their critics have come off very poorly in that exchange. The conversation now switches to aesthetics. Fittingly enough, the intestinal tour guide swears by George Moore's dictum that "Art is a sublime excrement." Balso mentions Daudet in refutation, but the guide dismisses his theories as so much fish-chowder. The guide does not care for the exigencies and commonplaces with which realism deals. He prefers Moore's moral anarchism and aestheticism. Irrelevantly, Balso observes that Picasso believes there are no feet in nature. The guide takes flight on a theory of points that links the aesthetic problem of realism versus abstraction to the

epistemological problem of universals versus nominalism to the metaphysical problem of monism versus pluralism:

"If you are willing to acknowledge the existence of points, then the statement that there are no feet in nature puts you in an untenable position. It depends for its very meaning on the fact that there are no points. Picasso, by making this assertion, has placed himself on the side of monism in the eternal wrangle between the advocates of the Singular and those of the Plural. As James puts it, 'Does reality exist distributively or collectively--in the shape of eaches, everys, anys, eithers or only in the shape of an all or whole?' If reality is singular then there are no feet in nature, if plural, a great many. If the world is one (everything part of the same thing--called by Picasso nature) then nothing either begins or ends. Only when things take the shape of eaches, everys, anys, eithers (have ends) do they have feet. Feet are attached to ends, by definition. Moreover, if everything is one, and has neither ends nor beginnings, then everything is a circle. A circle has no feet. If we believe that nature is a circle, then we must also believe that there are no feet in nature.

"Do not pooh-pooh this idea as mystical. Bergson has . . ." (pp. 8-9).

Balso, driven to the wall by the guide's logic, intrudes a statement from Cezanne, "Everything tends toward the globular," (just as Balso's song certainly did), and escapes the discussion.

West is here ridiculing the sterility of aesthetics and of philosophical reasoning in general, but he displays a thorough understanding of the principles involved. Ultimately, he declares all such questions inconsequential and not worth pursuing, but his satire gains authority from the evident keenness of his mind. He is not an intellectual adolescent, afraid of complex problems (as is Balso);

his nihilism is that of one who understands thoroughly what he is rejecting, whether it be religion, philosophy, or art.

Two nihilistic methods predominate in this first chapter: facetious allusion and mock dialectic. The opposition of thesis and antithesis (Christianity versus Judaism, the Old World versus the New, and so forth) does not, as in Hegel, issue in a synthesis, but rather in a reduction of both terms to absurdity. Thesis versus antithesis equals nothingness--that is the Westian dialectic.

In the second chapter, Balso comes upon Maloney the Areopagite. Just as the guide hastened to stereotype himself as Jewish, Maloney identifies himself as "a catholic [sic] mystic" (p. 10). Maloney is an idealist, but he seeks to liberate his spirituality not through art, but through the abnegation of the body. He is naked except for a derby of thorns, and he is attempting to crucify himself with thumbtacks. His rationale is the statement of St. Hildegarde, "The lord dwells not in the bodies of the healthy and vigorous" (p. 10). Just as Balso is secure in a literary tradition, Maloney foots the well-trod path of such Catholic mystics as Marie Alacoque, Suso, Labre, Lydwine of Schiedam, Rose of Lima, Notker Balbus, Ekknard le Vieux, Hucbald le Chauve. And in his own fashion, Maloney is also a devotional poet:

In the feathered darkness
 Of thy mouth,
 O Mother of God!
 I worship Christ
 The culminating rose (p. 10).

Like any mystic worth his salt, Maloney spends the proper time concerned with the least of his brethren--the vermin. He is, in fact, the biographer of Saint Puce, a flea who was born, lived, and died in the armpit of Christ.

Maloney tries to document the continuity of the Classical and Christian traditions and in so doing he implicates Dionysus and Athene, Leda and Europa, in the satire. West has great fun at the expense of the Virgin Birth:

"Saint Puce had two mothers: the winged creature that laid the egg, and the God that hatched it in the flesh. Like most of us, he had two fathers: our Father who art in Heaven, and he who in the cocksureness of our youth we called 'pop.'"

"Which of his two fathers fertilized the egg? I cannot answer with certainty, but the subsequent actions of Saint Puce's life lead me to believe that the egg was fertilized by a being whose wings were of feathers. Yes, I mean the Dove or Paraclete--the Sanctus Spiritus (p. 11).

Puce's life is, inevitably, one protracted communion with divinity. As a culmination of his travels about the body of Christ, he authors his magnum opus, A Geography of Our Lord. The day comes when Christ's arms are stretched on the cross and Puce's armpit cathedral is exposed to the ravages of sun and climate. Puce refuses to desert the

ship, and his martyrdom follows close upon that of the Master.

Maloney is brought to tears by his own telling. Once again the realistic Balso staunchly opposes such neurotic behavior:

"I think you're morbid. . . . Don't be morbid. Take your eyes off your navel. Take your head from under your armpit. Stop sniffing mortality. Play games. Don't read so many books. Take cold showers. Eat more meat" (p. 13).

After dispensing this advice, so typical of a healthy American, Balso continues his pilgrimage.

The mortification of the body does not yield spirituality. It yields morbidity and is a type of masochism. Largely by allusion and comic parallel, West includes in his indictment not simply modern-day Maloneys, but all ascetics and their prototype, Christ. West does not reduce Christ to a good man or to a beautiful myth, as many unorthodox thinkers have done. He reduces Christ to absurdity. The effect of the Incarnation, theologically, is to raise humanity virtually to the level of the deity. West's interpretation of the doctrine lowers the concept of the deity to the level of man, and the force of the novel is to reduce man to the level of the animal.

Religion, then, is not, in West's opinion, the way to spirituality. But West also exposes Balso's way--a healthy mind in a healthy body--as too banal even to require detailed satire. Any boob, the author implies,

can see that animal existence is not enough--that is what we are all trying to escape--but man's illusions of spirituality require a certain amount of effort to debunk.

West's blasphemy reminds one of Malachi Mulligan's. It has the same intimate bite of one who knows well what he is satirizing. This is a special triumph for West since he was not, like Joyce, educated as a Catholic, or even as a Christian.

The function of the imagery is to diminish the thing described in the very proportion that it purports to be enhancing it:

"... The music of our Lord's skin sliding over his flesh!--more intricate than the maze at Cnossos. The odors of His Body!--more fragrant than the Temple of Solomon. The temperature of His flesh!--more pleasant than the Roman baths to the youth Puce. And, finally, the taste of His blood! In this wine all pleasure, all excitement, was magnified, until with ecstasy Saint Puce's small body roared like a furnace (p. 12).

"In his prime, Saint Puce wandered far from his birthplace, that hairsilk pocketbook, the armpit of our Lord. He roamed the forest of God's chest and crossed the hill of his abdomen. He measured and sounded that fathomless well, the Navel of our Lord. He explored and charted every crevasse, ridge, and cavern of Christ's body (p. 12).

"The hot sun of Calvary burnt the flesh beneath Christ's upturned arm, making the petal-like skin shrivel until it looked like the much-shaven armpit of an old actress (p. 12).

Around the next bend of the intestine, Balso finds hidden in a hollow tree an English theme written by John

Gilson for his eighth-grade teacher, Miss McGeeney. The precocious theme is a Crime Journal, written in obvious imitation of Crime and Punishment and Notes from the Underground. Gilson abhors the use of "masks, cardboard noses, diaries, memoirs, letters from a Sabine farm, the theatre" because these are forms of illusion and Gilson considers himself an honest man. West was probably similarly impatient with literary forms. Nevertheless, Gilson settles on the diary form, for he is a man divided against himself and must compromise to exist. After a picturesque lament for the inaccessibility of the Real, he concludes his first entry with the sobering detail, "Written while smelling the moistened forefinger of my left hand" (p. 14). Gilson's awareness of his animal nature forces him to parody his intellectual dilettantism.

This alternation of the serious and the burlesque continues. Gilson makes a few apt observations on the art of the diary, in particular the tendency of amateur diaries to deteriorate quickly after the first entry: "The white paper acts as a laxative. A diarrhoea of words is the result. The richness of the flow is unnatural; it cannot be sustained" (p. 14). He admits his own split-personality. At times he is "honest Iago" and at times Raskolnikov, but he is never simply John Gilson. He who abhors personae exists only in the shells of literary creations. His schizophrenia supports Alan Ross's statement that "Balso

Snell analyzes only the disintegration of the Self, and its illusion of superiority at its most pathetic moment of neurotic isolation."¹³

Signing himself "John Raskolnikov Gilson," the young psychotic composes a journal within a journal, entitled The Making of a Fiend. His first concern is with his own sanity. He is residing in an asylum where he notices that his mother, during her visits, is much more disordered than himself. He first asserts that "order is the test of sanity," and then that "order is vanity" (p. 15). The reader soon infers that there is little to choose between the hysteria of the mother and the intellectual cancer of the incarcerated son. Gilson seeks refuge in the aurea mediocritas, "Sanity is the absence of extremes" (p. 15). His new ballast is short-lived. Suspecting that someone is reading his diary, he leaves the note, "You who read these pages while I sleep, please sign here" (p. 15). His schizophrenia is confirmed when he rises at night to sign the incriminating page himself.

From this point in the diary, West allows the narration to become steadily more serious, without the moments of self-mockery. The Crime Journal becomes Dostoevsky in miniature, sharing the Russian master's

13. Ross, p. xi.

preoccupation with the divided man. West first debunks the myth of the possessed artist. Gilson confesses,

In everything I was completely the mad poet. I was one of those "great despisers," whom Nietzsche loved because "they are the great adorers; they are the arrows of longing for the other shore." Along with "mon hysterie" I cultivated a rotten, ripe maturity. You understand what I mean: like Rimbaud, I practiced having hallucinations (p. 16).

There is nothing romantic or spiritual about madness.

As a book-sorter in the public library, Gilson got a taste of the fruit of the world's intellectual efforts:

The books smelt like the breaths of their authors; the books smelt like a closet full of old shoes through which a steam pipe passes. As I handled them they seemed to turn into flesh, or at least some substance that could be eaten.

Have you ever spent any time among the people who farm the great libraries: the people who search old issues of the medical journals for pornography and facts about strange diseases; the comic writers who exhume jokes from old magazines; the men and women employed by the insurance companies to gather statistics on death? I worked in the philosophy department. That department is patronized by alchemists, astrologers, cabalists, demonologists, magicians, atheists, and the founders of new religious systems (p. 17).

The books were never more than excretions of their authors and they are as dead as their authors are or soon will be. The people who consult them are cannibals, trying to feed their own illusions on dead illusions.

Gilson admits to a history of masochism:

While working in the library, I lived in a theatrical rooming house in the west Forties, a miserable, uncomfortable, place. I lived there

because of the discomfort. I wanted to be miserable. I could not have lived in a comfortable house (p. 17).

On the top floor of Gilson's rooming house lives an idiot dishwasher. The idiot comes to personify for Gilson man's animality. It is this animality which all the "fervors, deliriums, ambitions, and dreams" of art are designed to transcend (p. 17). It is the awareness of this animality that has disordered Gilson's mind. Gilson describes this "noble savage" without sentimentality:

He was a fat, pink and grey pig of a man, and stank of stale tobacco, dry perspiration, clothing mold, and oatmeal soap. He did not have a skull on the top of his neck, only a face; his head was all face--a face without side, back or top, like a mask (p. 18).

The most irritating thing about the idiot is that "a beast of laughter always seemed to be struggling to escape from between his teeth" (p. 18). He is reminded of this laughter by an incident at a performance of Gounod's Faust. The basso was at first unable to summon up a stage laugh on cue. When the laughter finally caught fire, it consumed the man and he was unable to cease his hysterics. Gilson has had enough of this cosmic joke. He returns home determined to murder the idiot. After an interlude of Dostoevskian soul-searching, he commits the crime with a heavy knife. It is patterned on Raskolnikov's murder and on the acte gratuit of Lafcadio's Adventures in that it is not inspired by any of the motivations popularized by

detective writers and criminologists. Gilson explains that he killed the man to restore his balance, just as, during his childhood, he always had to kill the flies in his room before he could go to sleep.

That this compulsion neurosis has the usual sexual causes is demonstrated by the manner of the crime. In spite of Gilson's intellectual pretensions, it becomes an inverted sex murder. He chooses a knife because "as a child I always took pleasure in cutting soft, firm things" (p. 20). The murder has been magnified into a ritual castration of man's animal nature. But Gilson is defeated in his attempt to cut the mind free from the body because his mind is seduced by the sexual gratification of the murder:

Naked: I felt cold; and I noticed that my genitals were tight and hard, like a dog's, or an archaic Greek statue's--they were as though I had just come out of an ice-cold bath. I was aware of a great excitement; an excitement that seemed to be near, but not quite within me (p. 21).

Thus Gilson commits the murder in the nude. He makes a mess of it and is possessed by fear until he can deposit the knife in the river. Then he undergoes a blissful transformation. Freed of his maleness, his anima is able to assert itself:

I caressed my breasts like a young girl who has suddenly become conscious of her body on a hot afternoon. I imitated the mannered walk of a girl showing off before a group of boys. In the dark I hugged myself (p. 22).

He tries to attract some sailors, but they laugh at him. Finally, he sits down on a bench and is sick to his stomach with self-disgust. The murder has already become malignant within him.

The murder, as James Light has explained, is a crisis in the struggle between Gilson's mind and body, a battle instigated by the mind, but turned to its own purposes by the body:

When Raskolnikov murders the idiot, he does so to gain the victory of the spirit over the flesh. Dramatically, this is effective because the idiot--through his pink, fat throat, his filthiness, his toilet-like swallowing--has become the flesh in all its animal vulgarity. The further implication is that Raskolnikov has not only murdered the animal flesh of another, but also has attempted the symbolic murder of the flesh within himself.

. . . The orgasm suggests that the murder itself is not a spiritual triumph at all, but instead is only the beginning of abnormal sexual satisfaction. One can hardly overlook the sexual implications of the murder: how Raskolnikov had undressed beforehand, and how he had gone to commit the murder with his sexual organs tight, like the genitals of a dog.¹⁴

Light is inaccurate in speaking of an "orgasm." Gilson is highly excited, but there is no mention of any crisis to his excitement. Nevertheless, it is clear that the body has arranged its own "punishment" for Gilson's attempted "crime" against it.

Gilson's sex life is arrested, juvenile. Nevertheless, it is in regard to his isolation, his

14. Light, p. 46.

introspection, his sadomasochism, that the first touch of pathos slips into the book. The reader sympathizes with the boy's lonely quest for freedom from himself. Nor does West rebuke Gilson with any carpe diem nonsense about enjoying the animal pleasures. The animal pleasures are embodied in the idiot.

West and Dostoevsky shared this concern for the intellectual divided against himself. The doppelganger, consequently, abounds in their works. West, however, differs from Dostoevsky in three important respects. First of all, he goes beyond his analysis of the divided man to satirize himself for becoming serious in a world that does not reward serious inquiries with usable answers. Secondly, he rejects Dostoevsky's mysticism outright. Thirdly, he employs an imagistic style that is as different from the Russian's passionate abundance as a grain of sand is different from a beach. Gilson finds striking images for his self-analysis:

I must devote my whole life to the pursuit of a shadow. It is as if I were attempting to trace with the point of a pencil the shadow of the tracing pencil. I am enchanted with the shadow's shape and want very much to outline it; but the shadow is attached to the pencil and moves with it, never allowing me to trace its tempting form (p. 16).

I climbed into myself like a bear into a hollow tree, and lay there long hours, overpowered by the heat, odor, and nastiness of I (p. 17).

Inside my head the murder has become like a piece of sand inside the shell of an oyster. My mind has commenced to form a pearl around it. The idiot, the singer, his laugh, the knife, the river, my change of sex, all cover an irritating grain of sand. As the accumulations grow and become solidified, the original irritation disappears. If the murder continues to grow in size it may become too large for me to contain; then I am afraid it will kill me, just as the pearl eventually kills the oyster (p. 22).

West has led himself and the reader into a trap. The fourth chapter opens with Balso returning the manuscript to the tree and sadly musing that "the world was getting to be a difficult place for a lyric poet" (pp. 22-23). "Ah youth!" he parodies Melville, "Ah Balso Snell!" (p. 23). His lament is sharply interrupted by Gilson himself, who demands, "Well, nosey, how did you like my theme?" (p. 23). Balso's reply is a subtle blending of dilettantism and parental cleanmindedness: "Interesting psychologically, but is it art? . . . I'd give you B minus and a good spanking" (p. 23).

Gilson is a little realist who gladly prostitutes his art for financial or sexual remuneration. When he discovers Balso is a poet and without any market value whatsoever, the youngster's scorn knows no bounds. Balso, the bard of suburbia, regurgitates stock prescriptions for mental health: "'What you ought to do, child, is to run about more. Read less and play baseball" (p. 23). Gilson dismisses this YMCA advice, although he does admit that he

once wrote a poem to seduce a fat girl who only sleeps with poets:

O Beast of Walls!
O Walled-in Fat Girl!
Your conquest was hardly worth
The while of one whom Arras and
Arrat, Pelion, Ossa, Parnassus, Ida,
Pisgah and Pike's Peak never in-
terested (p. 23).

In spite of his triumph with this exclamatory, allusive, freely-formed masterpiece, Gilson's vocation is not a labor of love:

I'm fed up with poetry and art. Yet what can I do? I need women and because I can't buy or force them, I have to make poems for them. God knows how tired I am of using the insanity of Van Gogh and the adventures of Gauguin as can-openers for the ambitious Count Six-Times. And how sick I am of the literary bitches. But they're the only kind that'll have me (pp. 23-24).

In order to rid himself of the gremlin, Balso buys a copy of Gilson's latest autobiographical pamphlet.

Once again West has revealed the physiological basis for cultural activity. The sex appeal of the poet has been prominently advertised since Byron. But Byron, whether a poseur or not, was at least serious about his art. Gilson is the last phase in a movement that has seen the image of the writer become decidedly phallic, almost to the exclusion of interest in his works.

We are dealing with two Gilsons, however. The Gilson of the Crime Journal is a tortured seeker of truth. The Gilson who created Raskolnikov is a cynic who has not

contested the claims of the body, but capitulated totally. He is partially refreshing as an antidote to Raskolnikov's delirium and Balso Snell's bromidic banalities. But he is also depressing, because he is deluded in his cynicism and vulgarity. That beast of walls, the walled-in fat girl, is even less worth our while than arid philosophy.

Strangely, the Pamphlet, which Gilson has offered as "a brief outline of my position" is a complete departure from the brattish tone of its author. It is closer to that of the Crime Journal. The narrator is, however, more composed than Raskolnikov Gilson. He is not psychotic and, if he is neurotic, he is at least articulate in the probing of his neuroses. The roots of his troubles are the same as those of Raskolnikov Gilson--an acute metaphysical ennui and an abnormal sex life.

The pamphlet opens with the unnamed narrator receiving word of the death of his mistress Saniette. He uses this as an excuse for not shaving. As usual he is self-critical: "I recognized the cardboard and tin of my position (a young man, while shaving, dismisses death with a wave of his hand)" (p. 24). He views the situation from every angle in search of an emotion. None arrives. At last, he is forced to admit that he is irrevocably committed to "the side of intellect against the emotions . . . the side of the brain against the heart" (p. 24). This clinical, intellectual coldness is, of course, the

unforgivable sin of Ethan Brand, as well as of Ivan Karamazov, Stavrogin, and Raskolnikov.

Gilson's emotional block stems from the prefabricated responses from which he is compelled to choose in every situation. He has been trained by literature to react to various situations in various ways. He has been taught by literature that all responses are ultimately constructs. To death, for instance, his response may be "sentimental, satirical, formal"--his choice is one of convenience and appropriateness. He has no virgin sensibility with which to react un-selfconsciously to experience. His spontaneity has been eroded first by daily life (in which society demands conventional masks at funerals, weddings, and so forth), and secondly by literature (where the social responses are exposed as masks, but where characterization still depends on credible, consistent behavior). When he is finally driven to admit that his search for pure emotion is hopelessly stymied by his education in formal emotions, Gilson tries to elevate his emotional impotence to a heroic stance by practicing "a few sneers in the bathroom mirror" (p. 25).

Saniette's deathbed struggles afford West a chance to ridicule another religion, Christian Science:

. . . I pictured the death of Saniette. Hiding under the blankets of her hospital bed and invoking the aid of Mother Eddy and Doctor Coue: "I won't die! I am getting better and better. I won't die! The will is master o'er the flesh. I won't die!" Only to have Death answer: "Oh, yes you

will." And she had. I made Death's triumph my own (p. 25).

Gilson implies that health and illness may be psychosomatic, but that it is probably the body causing mental illness, rather than the opposite. Nevertheless, as much as he despises his own cold plight, he loathes even more the unquestioning optimism of the world's Saniettes, who force experience into their own mental molds:

The inevitability of death has always given me pleasure, not because I am eager to die, but because all the Saniettes must die. When the preacher explained the one thing all men could be certain of--all must die--the King of France became angry. When death prevailed over the optimism of Saniette, she was, I am certain, surprised. The thought of Saniette's surprise pleases me, just as the King's anger must have pleased the preacher (p. 25).

He has a further reason for disliking Saniette. She represented the world's audiences, all those observing eyes that force one to play a role. Their actor-audience relationship came to epitomize for him the sexual charade:

I have forgotten the time when I could look back at an affair with a woman and remember anything but a sequence of theatrical poses--poses that I assumed, no matter how aware I was of their ridiculousness, because they were amusing. All my acting has but one purpose, the attraction of the female (p. 26).

The narrator repeats, in a different tone, Gilson's defense of his intellectual prostitution. Lacking physical charms, he had to substitute "strange conceits, wise and witty sayings, peculiar conduct, Art, for the muscles, teeth, hair, of my rivals" (p. 26). In one of West's almost

Homeric similes, the narrator illustrates the role of intellect in his life:

My case is similar to that of a bird called the *Amblyornis inornata*. As his name indicates, the *Inornata* is a dull-colored ugly bird. Yet the *Inornata* is cousin to the Bird of Paradise. Because he lacks his cousin's brilliant plumage, he has to exteriorize internal feathers. The *Inornata* plants a garden and builds a house of flowers as a substitute for the gay feathers of his relative. Of course the female *Inornata* loves her shabby artist dearly: yet when a friend passes, Mrs. Bird of Paradise can say, "Show your tail, dear," while Mrs. *Inornata*, to her confusion, has no explanation to give for her love. If she is in a temper she might even ask Mr. *Inornata* to exteriorize a few internal feathers. Still more, the Bird of Paradise cannot be blamed for the quality of his tail--it just grew. The *Inornata*, however, is held personally responsible for his performance as an artist (pp. 26-27).

The narrator, then, is driven to artificiality not only by the demands of society, not only by his literary self-consciousness, but also as a compensation for his lack of other gifts. This is the paradox of the Wound and the Bow, but it does not have the heroic implications that Edmund Wilson accords it. For, if the narrator could be a Hamlet or a tragic clown, he would be satisfied to make a stage of life. But he always finds it necessary to "burlesque the mystery of feeling at its source; I must laugh at myself, and if the laugh is 'bitter' I must laugh at the laugh" (p. 27). This explains the curious ambivalence of the novel's humor. West is laughing at life, but he is also laughing at laughter. He leaves no honorable recourse to humans, neither sainthood nor

cynicism. Nor can an author be serious or humorous with impunity.

Driven by the implacability of such knowledge as this, the narrator seeks relief in causing pain: he beats Saniette. A hotel clerk breaks in upon them. In another brilliant monologue the narrator tries to describe to them the torment of simply being flesh and blood:

"This evening I am very nervous. I have a sty on my eye, a cold sore on my lip, a pimple where the edge of my collar touches my neck, another pimple in the corner of my mouth, and a drop of salt snot on the end of my nose. Because I rub them continually my nostrils are inflamed, sore and angry.

"My forehead is wrinkled so hard that it hurts, yet I cannot un wrinkle it. I spend many hours trying to un wrinkle my forehead. I try to catch myself by surprise; I try to smooth my forehead with my fingers; I try to concentrate my whole mind to this end, but I am unable to make smooth my brow. The skin over my eyebrows is tied in an aching, unbreakable knot.

"The wood of this table, the glasses on it, this girl's woollen dress, the skin under it, excites and annoys me. It seems to me as though all the materials of life--wood, glass, wool, skin--are rubbing against my sty, my cold sore and my pimples; rubbing in such a way as not to satisfy the itch or convert irritation into active pain, but so as to increase the size of the irritation, magnify it and make it seem to cover everything--hysteria, despair.

"I go to a mirror and squeeze the sty with all my strength. I tear off the cold sore with my nails. I scrub my salt-encrusted nostrils with the rough sleeve of my overcoat. If I could only turn irritation into pain; could push the whole thing into insanity and so escape. I am able to turn irritation into active pain for only a few seconds, but the pain soon subsides and the monotonous rhythm of irritation returns. O how fleeting is pain!--I cry. I think of sandpapering my body. I think of grease, of sandalwood oil, of saliva; I think of velvet, of Keats, of music,

of the hardness of precious stones, of mathematics, of the arrangements of architecture. But, alas! I can find no relief" (p. 28).

The narrator's sadomasochism is not the result of some childhood trauma, but the natural recourse of one who cannot obliterate the constant displeasure of his body in any other way. I think that West has here hit upon something more than an effective tour de force of characterization. He has isolated a bizarre human universal--the ever-present physical discomfort--which previous novelists have only touched upon in passing. Moreover, the force of the passage gives a much greater reality to his nihilism than the somewhat adolescent complaints of many of the characters.

Saniette and the clerk cannot cope with this original insight. They must take their "truth" in familiar doses. Saniette concludes that Gilson does not love her "because a gentleman would never strike a lady," and the clerk threatens to call the police (p. 29). Only by dropping the names of the Marquis de Sade and Huysman's Gilles de Rais does Gilson save the day. Saniette and the clerk are people of the world and thus familiar with the sadists of literature. All is accounted for because all is categorized. The clerk withdraws and Saniette goes back to bed.

The next day Gilson tries once more to pierce through to Saniette's understanding. He tells her of an

animalistic chauffeur, named The Desire to Procreate, a creature reminiscent of Raskolnikov Gilson's idiot, who lives within him:

"Can you imagine how it feels to have this cloth-covered devil within one? While naked, were you ever embraced by a fully-clothed man? Do you remember how his button-covered coat felt, how his heavy shoes felt against your skin? Imagine having this man inside of you, fumbling and fingering your heart and tongue with wool-covered hands, treading your tender organs with stumbling feet" (p. 30).

Saniette finds the image monstrously funny. She smiles superiorly.

Gilson's snowballing resentment of Saniette generates a magnificent fantasy of revenge. She now represents a specific kind of audience, one which relishes the performance of such eccentrics as Gilson. This audience is "the smart, sophisticated, sensitive yet hardboiled, art-loving frequenters of the little theatres" (p. 30). He dreams of producing a play for

the discriminating few: art-lovers and book-lovers, school teachers who adore culture, lending librarians, publisher's assistants, homosexualists and homosexualists' assistants, hard-drinking newspaper men, interior decorators, and the writers of advertising copy (p. 30).

The play will be properly avant-garde. Gilson will compliment the audience "on their good taste in preferring Art to animal acts" (p. 30). Then the cast will march to the footlights and declaim from Chekhov:

"It would be more profitable for the farmer to raise rats for the granary than for the bourgeois to nourish the artist, who must always be occupied with undermining institutions" (p. 30).

As a pièce de résistance,

the ceiling of the theatre will be made to open and cover the occupants with tons of loose excrement. After the deluge, if they so desire, the patrons of my art can gather in the customary charming groups and discuss the play (p. 31).

There is, in other words, nothing to choose from between Art and animal acts, deluded optimism and knowing pessimism, prostituted art and "serious" art, lack of consciousness or the constant irritation of consciousness.

The novel is more than an attack on Art; it is an attack on the complete artificiality of consciousness. Art, history, religion, philosophy, psychology, bourgeois axioms--these are all aspects of Artificiality, the Westian transcendental. And this transcendental artificiality leaves no possibility of unadulterated spirit. Not only is the mind harassed by the body; it is also divided against itself.

Once again Balso discards Gilson's work with a parental sigh. Fortunately, the decline of the younger generation has been more amply, more complacently documented than any other recurrent phenomenon. Thus Balso, drawing upon the artificiality of amateur sociology blames,

the war, the invention of printing, nineteenth-century science, communism, the wearing of soft hats, the use of contraceptives, the large number of delicatessen stores, the movies, the tabloids,

the lack of adequate ventilation in large cities, the passing of the saloon, the soft collar fad, the spread of foreign art, the decline of the western world, commercialism, and finally, for throwing the artist back on his own personality, the renaissance (p. 31).

Naturally, Balso is relieved after this analysis. He has cured the evil by classifying its causes. Turning once more to the beau ideal, he asks rhetorically, "'What is beauty, saith my sufferings then?'" In answer, there appears a young girl, bathing naked in a public fountain, reminiscent of the apparition of the Muse to Stephen Dedalus as he walked along the strand. In that case, the young artist perceived his "call" to the artistic life. Here, the girl heralds, in a paeon of baroque imagery, Balso's call to the erotic:

"Charge, oh poet, the red-veined flowers of suddenly remembered intimacies--the foliage of memory. Feel, oh poet, the warm knife of thought swift stride and slit in the ready garden.

"Soon the hot seed will come to thwart the knife's progress. The hot seed will come in a joyous burst-birth of reeking undergrowth and swamp forest (pp. 31-32).

Her imagery becomes progressively less ethereal:

"Walk toward the houses of the city of your memory, oh poet! Houses that are protuberances on the skin of streets--warts, tumors, pimples, corns, nipples, sebaceous cysts, hard and soft chancres" (p. 32).

Balso interrupts her by sticking his tongue in her mouth. A metamorphosis takes place. The girl becomes Miss McGeeney, John Gilson's schoolteacher, an authoress in her

own right, described as "a middle aged woman dressed in a mannish suit and wearing hornrimmed glasses" (p. 32).

Miss McGeeney is writing a biography of Samuel Perkins. Perkins is the biographer of E. F. Fitzgerald, who is the biographer of D. B. Hobson, who is the biographer of Boswell. Miss McGeeney shrewdly predicts that someone will "take the hint" and write a life of Miss McGeeney. The chain biographers "will all go rattling down the halls of time, each one in his or her turn a tin can on the tail of Doctor Johnson" (p. 33).

Miss McGeeney will not be satisfied with a pedestrian narration of dates and events in her book; she has attempted to isolate the quintessence of Samuel Perkins. Her book is entitled Samuel Perkins: Smeller for "at an age when most men's features are regular, before his personality had been able to elevate any one portion of his physiognomy over the rest, Perkins' face was dominated by his nose" (p. 33). She accounts for his olfactory prowess by a theory of natural compensation:

He was deaf and almost blind; his fingers fumbled stupidly; his mouth was always dry and contained a dull, insensitive tongue. But his nose! His nose was a marvelously sensitive and nice instrument. Nature had concentrated in his sense of smell all the abilities usually distributed among the five senses. She had strengthened this organ and had made it so sensitive that it was able to do duty for all the contact organs (p. 34).

The reader discovers he has been led into a clever burlesque of synaesthesia, the poetic device of interpreting one type of sensation in terms of another which was raised to the level of a mystique by the Symbolists. A famous example is the second stanza of Baudelaire's sonnet "Correspondances":

Il est des parfums frais comme des chairs d'enfants,
Doux comme les hautbois, verts comme les prairies,
Et d'autres, corrompus, riches et triomphants,

Ayant l'expansion des choses infinies,
Comme l'ambre, le musc, le benjoin et l'encens,
Qui chantent les transports de l'esprit et des sens.

According to Miss McGeeney,

Perkins was able to translate the sensations of sound, sight, taste, and touch, into that of smell. He could smell a chord in D minor, or distinguish between the tone-smell of a violin and that of a viola. He could smell the caress of velvet and the strength of iron. It has been said of him that he could smell an isosceles triangle; I mean that he could apprehend through the sense of smell the principles involved in isosceles triangles (p. 35).

Subsequently, Miss McGeeney refers to Rimbaud's sonnet "Voyelles" and to Des Esseintes, the epicurean hero of A Rebours, as believers in synaesthesia.

There is more involved here than the burlesque of an overused literary device. Baudelaire's synaesthesia reflects a Swedenborgian monism, the belief in a transcendent reality of which all the phenomena of this world are symbols. This hidden immanence is the ground for the

unity of the senses. West, likewise, extends his satire into metaphysical realms:

"Rather than a tread-mill, I should call the senses a circle. A step forward along the circumference is a step nearer the starting place. Perkins went, along the circumference of the circle of his senses, from anticipation to realization, from hunger to satiation, from naivete to sophistication, from simplicity to perversion. He went . . . from the smell of new-mown hay to that of musk and vervain (from the primitive to the romantic), and from vervain to sweat and excrement (from the romantic to the realistic); and, finally, to complete the circuit, from excrement he returned to new-mown hay. . . . And a man like Perkins is able to make the circle of his sensory experience approach the infinite (pp. 35-36).

The biological cycle, the historical cycle, the artistic cycle--all these are manifestations of the cyclical unity of life as perceived by Perkins' nose. This was also the subject of Balso's opening song.

Perkins carries his mania for systematization even into his intimate life. He marries a woman solely for the sake of categorizing her smells:

"He told me that he had built from the odors of his wife's body an architecture and an aesthetic, a music and a mathematic. Counterpoint, multiplication, the square root of a sensation, the cube root of an experience--all were there. He told me that he had even discovered a politic, a hierarchy of odors, self-government, direct . . ." (p. 36).

This is too much for the healthy-minded Balso. He deals Miss McGeeney a blow in the abdomen.

West reduces to absurdity scholarship, the feminine ideal, and the belief in an ordered, coherent unity. If a

person trusts that he can perceive the universe in a grain of sand, he must also be able to perceive it in a wart, a tumor, a pimple, and so forth. The attempt of idealistic philosophies to arrange experience into a system of any sort is as arbitrary as Perkins' nose. One unity exists--matter--and that is a unity without system.

Having escaped Miss McGeeney's clutches, Balso finally perceives the secret of the wooden horse. It "was inhabited solely by writers in search of an audience" (p. 37). Balso resolves that he will not listen to another story. He accelerates his search for the exit to the intestine.

Balso stops at a sidewalk cafe where he falls asleep over his beer. This introduces a long dream-within-a-dream sequence. He dreams that he is once again with the harem of his youth, the beautiful girl-cripples who congregate in the lobby of Carnegie Hall "because Art is their only solace, most men looking upon their strange forms with distaste" (p. 37). Even in his sexual tastes, Balso manifests the same antipathy to the Ideal: "Their strange foreshortenings, hanging heads, bulging spinesacks, were a delight, for he had ever preferred the imperfect, knowing well the plainness, the niceness of perfection" (p. 37).

The cripple that Balso singles out for his special passion is an intellectual hunchback, Janey Davenport. She, like Balso, has had to settle for an auto-erotic

dream life and for the waking dream that is Art as compensation for natural attractiveness:

"O Arabesque, I, Balso Snell, shall replace music in your affections! Your pleasure shall no longer be vicarious. No longer shall you mentally pollute yourself. . . . O deviation from the Golden Mean! O out of alignment!" (p. 38).

Balso kisses her, eliciting from the narrator a passage of "True-Romance" prose:

No-one had ever before forgotten her strange shape long enough to realize how beautiful her soul was. She had never before known the thrill of being subdued by a male from a different land from that of her dreams. Now she had found a wonderful poet; now she knew the thrill she had never known before . . . had found it in the strength of this young and tall, strangely wise man, caught like herself in the meshes of the greatest net human hearts can know: Love (p. 38).

This burlesquing of hack prose will be one of the principal devices of A Cool Million. Here it helps to diminish the conceptions of a beautiful mind in an ugly exterior and the most flagrant of human idealizations, love.

When Balso tries to seduce Janey, he is greeted with a smokescreen of conventional brush-offs:

"Love, with me, Mr. Snell, is sacred. I shall never debase love, or myself, or the memory of my mother, in a hallway. Act your education, Mr. Snell. Tumbling in hallways at my age! How can you? After all, there are the eternal verities, not to speak of the janitor. And besides, we were never properly introduced" (p. 39).

Although she prefers music (and vicarious experience in general), Janey concedes that she will yield up her body

to Balso if he prosecutes a vendetta against Beagle Darwin, the betrayer whose child she carries in the hump on her back. Balso agrees to this charade of courtly love and Janey gives him two letters from Beagle. He has run off to Paris without her and the letters are defenses of his action as being in her best interest. The first projects what would have been Janey's fate if she had come to Paris.

Janey would have been a misfit, Beagle suggests, a sentimental bourgeois surrounded by cosmopolitan cynics. She would have been "pregnant, unmarried, unloved, lonely, watching the laughing crowds hurry past her window" (p. 41). With a deft narrative touch, Beagle shifts into the first person, from her viewpoint:

The ridiculous, ridiculous, all day long he talks of nothing else but how ridiculous this, that, or the other is. And he means me. I am absurd. He is never satisfied with calling other people ridiculous, with him everything is ridiculous--himself, me. Of course I can laugh at mother with him, or at the Hearth; but why must my own mother and home be ridiculous? I can laugh at Hobey, Joan, but I don't want to laugh at myself. I'm tired of laugh, laugh, laugh. I want to retain some portion of myself unlaughed at. There is something in me that I won't laugh at (p. 41).

And so forth. Janey has no one to turn to. Janey's mother is pitiless like Beagle. Her father was her great love, but he is dead. Her best friend is a Lesbian.

Therefore, she tries to break the news of her pregnancy to Beagle--matter-of-factly so as not to seem

ridiculous. But she bungles the pronunciation of "je suis enceinte" and Beagle goes nonchalantly out to plan a celebration.

Janey meditates suicide. She tries on all the tragic costumes, but in the back of her mind are always the taunts with which Beagle would deflate her tragedy. Finally she half-jumps, half-falls from the window ledge. The last word she hears is her mother's scolding "Clumsy!"

Beagle's laughter rides roughshod over maternity, the home, romance, suicide, self-respect--all the inalienable sacred cows that Janey would like to declare immune to ridicule. There can be no via media between idealism and cynicism. Beagle's offense is also his best defense, as when he explains his pessimism: "It's the war. Everybody is sad nowadays. Great stuff, pessimism" (p. 42).

Beagle's laughter may shield him from others, but it does not quell his own insecurity. His second letter, in the interests of impartiality, is a projection of his own reaction to Janey's hypothetical suicide. He is another of those inoculated by literature against life:

You once said to me that I talk like a man in a book. I not only talk, but think and feel like one. I have spent my life in books; literature has deeply dyed my brain its own color. This literary coloring is a protective one--like the brown of the rabbit or the checks of the quail--making it impossible for me to tell where literature ends and I begin (p. 47).

Thus, when he comes upon the crowd surrounding Janey's corpse in the street, his first reaction is relief that he will not have to arrange an abortion, but his second is that he will not know how to respond when his friends at the Cafe Carcas inform him of the suicide. His literary education has left him unable to respond spontaneously to her death, just as Gilson can only exist beneath his numerous masks. "Why is it impossible for you to understand, except in terms of art, her action?" he demands of himself (p. 49). Reviewing the elegies of the human predicament, he makes a concerted effort to attain a genuine sentiment. He fails.

He is recalled to the immediate problem. How shall he greet his mistress's death?:

I can refuse to stop dreaming, refuse to leave my ivory tower, refuse to disturb that brooding white bird, my spirit. A wave of the hand: "Yes, really. You don't say so?--quite dead." Or I can play one of my favorite roles, be the "Buffoon of the New Eternities" and cry: "Death, what is it? Life, what is it? Life is of course the absence of Death; and death merely the absence of Life." . . . For the sake of the waiters, I will be a quiet, sober, gentle, umbrella-carrying Mr. B. Darwin, and out of great sadness sob: "Oh, my darling, why did you do it? Oh why?" (p. 52).

He decides to feign the madness of Hamlet. To the revelations of the Carcas crowd he insistently replies, "'Bromius! Iacchus! Son of Zeus!'" (p. 53). This elicits astonished comments, including "Greek god!--does he think we don't know he's a Methodist?" (p. 53). As his

oracles become more allusive, his literary friends begin to appreciate them. His masterpiece is a parody of the "ubi sunt" laments:

"Or quick tell me where has gone Samson?-- strongest of men. He is no longer even weak. And where, oh tell me, where is the beautiful Appolyon? He is no longer even ugly. And where are the snows of yesteryear? And where is Tom Giles? Bill Taylor? Jake Holtz? In other words, 'Here today and gone tomorrow'" (p. 54).

His role is a success and encores are demanded. Beagle responds with a long digression on the impossibility of bridging the gap between the superhuman--Christ, Dionysus, and Gargantua--who have been born with the attendance of heavenly omens, and the merely human--Janey Davenport--"conceived in an offhand manner on a rainy afternoon." For the first time in his life he experiences profound emotions:

B. Hamlet Darwin towered over his glass of cognac, and, in the theatre of his mind, over a cringing audience tempestuous, gallant, headstrong, lovable Beagle Dionysius Hamlet Darwin. Up into his giant heart there welled a profound feeling of love for humanity. He choked with emotion as he realized the truth of his observations. Terrible indeed was the competition in which his hearers spent their lives; a competition that demanded their being more than animals (p. 55).

The next moment he turns upon himself and sneers at his own compassion:

After building up his tear-jerker routine for a repeat, he blacked out and went into his juggling for the curtain. He climaxed the finale by keeping in the air an Ivory Tower, a Still

White Bird, the Holy Grail, the Nails, the Scourge, the Thorns, and a piece of the True Cross (p. 56).

This is Jamesian narrative complexity with a vengeance. Balso is dreaming a dream within a dream. He is given the letters by Janey Davenport, a character from the second level-dream, one of the many faces of his own personality. The letters are written by Beagle Darwin, and they contain fictional narrations. In the first he assumes Janey's personality; in the second he views himself under a microscope. By removing the reader so many steps from reality, West reduces to absurdity fiction itself. It becomes a shadow of a shadow of a shadow of a shadow, so remote that it is only a stylized image of reality.

One more level is added when, with the opening of the last chapter, Janey Davenport is changed to Miss McGeeney, who admits that the letters are part of an epistolary novel which she is writing in the manner of Richardson. She solicits Balso's opinion of their contemporaneity. Balso, as willing to prostitute criticism as Gilson was willing to prostitute art, hands down a verdict in the worst tradition of book reviewing:

"A stormy wind blows through your pages, sweeping the reader breathless . . . witchery and madness. Comparable to George Bernard Shaw. It is a drama of passion that has all the appeal of wild living and the open road. Comparable to George Bernard Shaw. There's magic in its pages, and warm strong sympathy for an alien race" (p. 57).

Balso's youth is restored by this new passion. Miss McGeeney, he discovers, is really Mary McGeeney, his old sweetheart. They know what they want. In some bushes outside the cafe, "Miss McGeeney lay down on her back with her hands behind her head and her knees wide apart. Balso stood over her and began a speech the intent of which was obvious" (p. 58).

Balso does not allow Miss McGeeney's readiness to cheat him out of a long seduction speech which sums up the seduction speeches of the ages. Politically, he advises her, sex is in the interests of Liberty. Philosophically, every agent, as Aristotle has shown, acts for its own pleasure. Artistically, experience is the root of creativity and of appreciation. He concludes with the time-honored argument of carpe diem.

Mary, in her turn, runs the gamut of female attitudes: the righteousness of the pioneers and the Renaissance queens, the compromises of the virgin and the jaded, the acceptance of the hard-bitten, the desperate, the passionate. Mary's "no's" blend at last into the rhythmic "yes" of Molly Bloom:

Mooooompitcher yaaaah. Oh I never hoped to know the passion, the sensuality hidden within you--yes, yes. Drag me down into the mire, drag. Yes! And with your hair the lust from my eyes brush. Yes . . . Yes . . . Ooo! Ah! (p. 61).

It would appear that the Unity of which Balso sang has prevailed:

The miracle was made manifest. The Two became One. The One that is all things and yet no one of them: the priest and the god, the immolation, the sacrificial rite, the libation offered to ancestors, the incantation, the sacrificial egg, the altar, the ego and the alter ego, as well as the father, the child, and the grandfather of the universe, the mystic doctrine, the purification, the syllable "Om," the path, the master, the witness, the receptacle, the Spirit of Public School 186, the last ferry that leaves for Weehawken at seven (p. 61).

But sex is not an emblem of spiritual unity, an Oversoul, a world of forms, a brotherhood of men, or any other manifestation of idealism. It is rather the victory of the physical. All the artists of the Trojan Horse have tried to transcend the physical. Balso, in particular, has quested for transcendence. When he found all the avenues of spirituality exhausted, he tried to affirm the physical, to join forces with it. But the physical does not need the cooperation of the mind; the mind is its plaything. Matter annihilates mind in this culminating nocturnal emission, a grotesque twist on the Elizabethan conceit of the little death:

His body broke free of the bard. It took on a life of its own; a life that knew nothing of the poet Balso. Only to death can this release be likened--to the mechanics of decay. After death the body takes command; it performs the manual of disintegration with a marvelous certainty. So now, his body performed the evolutions of love with a like sureness.

In this activity, Home and Duty, Love and Art, were forgotten.

An army moved in his body, an eager army of hurrying sensations. These sensations marched at first methodically and then hysterically, but

always with precision. The army of his body commenced a long intricate drill, a long involved ceremony. A ceremony whose ritual unwound and maneuvered itself with the confidence and training of chemicals acting under the stimulus of a catalytic agent.

His body screamed and shouted as it marched and uncoiled; then, with one heaving shout of triumph, it fell back quiet.

The army that a moment before had been thundering in his body retreated slowly--victorious, relieved (p. 62).

The only unity, says West, is matter, and the principle of personality is disintegration.

The critics have been hard put to agree upon the major theme or themes of Balso Snell. C. Carroll Hollis sees a special clue to the book in the final passage:

The death-wish that pervades the whole dream sequence culminates in this closing passage with its savage paradox that the sex act itself, the blind creative act of life, now becomes in reality the Ancient Mariner's Life-in-Death for modern man. This parallel to Coleridge's version of the Wandering Jew provides an added insight. Life-in-death had West in thrall, although it may be doubted that the "woeful agony" which forced him to begin this tale was sufficiently alleviated in the telling to leave him free. In fact he turned immediately to the writing of his second book.¹⁵

The book is, therefore, a projection of self-criticism, the rejection of the man without beliefs:

When Nathanael West returned to New York from his two year stay in Paris, he told A. J. Liebling that The Dream Life of Balso Snell was written "as a protest against writing books." That it is a protest against writing fiction is clear enough, but its significance is much more in its derisive rejection of himself.¹⁶

15. C. Carroll Hollis, "Nathanael West and the 'Lonely Crowd,'" Thought, XXXIII (Spring, 1958), 399.

16. Hollis, p. 398.

For James Light the book is not only a rude awakening from the dream of art, but also a search "for a central Unity, an Over Soul, that will make the meaninglessness of multiplicity into the ultimate truth of some essential oneness."¹⁷ V. L. Lokke dismisses Balso as an attack on the "literature boys," the intellectual aesthetes.¹⁸ The novel certainly includes such an attack. Similarly, Norman Podhoretz is on the trail of a partial truth in his observation that "the assault on culture in 'Balso Snell' is really part of West's assault on himself; he is sneering not so much at Western civilization as at his own ambition to become a part of it."¹⁹

The trouble with these summaries of Balso Snell is that they do not put first things first; their criticisms do not reflect the complexity of the novel.

Balso Snell is, above all, a rejection not merely of Art, not merely of West, but rather a rejection of life itself. The implied syllogism is that life is only worth living if man can give life meaning through spiritual activity. But all spirituality is either a sham or reducible to physiological causes. Therefore, life is

17. Light, pp. 53-54.

18. V. L. Lokke, "A Side Glance at Medusa: Hollywood, the Literature Boys, and Nathanael West," Southwest Review, XLVI (1961), 36-37.

19. Norman Podhoretz, "A Particular Kind of Joking," New Yorker, XXXIII (May 18, 1957), 146.

not worth living. Granted, the novel does constitute a revolt against art and a flagellation of the Self. But it is also an attack on Catholicism, Judaism, Christian Science, philosophy, history, music, poetry, scholarship, courtly love, the home, and patriotism. West launches his attack on the universal by means of attacks on particulars.

The novel has been criticized as formless. It is not formless. It does, however, constitute an original form embodying a nihilism which is, in its extremity, original in American literature. The principle involved is that of Charles Olson's projective verse: "Form is never more than an extension of content," along with its corollary, "That right form, in any given poem, is the only and exclusively possible extension of content under hand."²⁰ The form of Balso Snell cannot be described solely in the terminology of traditional novel criticism because there is no other novel quite like it. In the "journey" of this study through the novel, however, I have tried to point out the major methods employed by West, and a review of those techniques should clarify the form of the book.

First of all, West attacks the various manifestations of the spirit in two ways, by the facetious allusion

20. Charles Olson, "Projective Verse" in Donald M. Allen, ed., The New American Poetry: 1945-1960, (New York, 1960), p. 387.

and by the Westian dialectic. The first works on the principle of guilt by association; any name summoned up by one of the grotesques in Balso is certain to be diminished by the company it keeps. The dialectic pits thesis against antithesis and lets them destroy each other. The most important of these antitheses are Old World versus New World, Jews versus Christians, Monism versus Pluralism (in various contexts), realistic art versus abstract art, health versus mortification of the body, sanity versus insanity, mind versus body, delirium (or delusion) versus cynicism, optimism versus pessimism, art versus "animal acts," the consciousness against itself (reflection), the conventional pose versus the eccentric pose, ideal unity (system) versus material unity (disintegration), cynicism versus sentimentality, and man versus woman. This dialectic assures that no positive values will be inferred mistakenly from West's negativism. It rejects equally the two halves of human existence, mind and body, and in so doing rejects their sum--life.

The attack on literature has been overemphasized because West, as young writer and voluminous reader, had the secondary purpose of exorcising his influences and exposing the artificiality which reading induces. Victor Comerchero has best summarized West's case against literature:

West's protest against writing books is rather a protest against the consequences of reading literature: the artificiality and the sense of unreality, the self-consciousness and poisonous awareness that result from wide reading. . . .

Simply stated, this is the problem: the world of books is an unreal world, and yet at the same time heightens our awareness of the real world around us. The result of the insight is either escapism or a tortured, inhibiting self-consciousness. One becomes so aware of the forces at play upon oneself that one falls, in an attempt to escape from this knowledge, into a treacherous pattern of self-deceit. Wide reading forces us to compare ourselves and others with literary figures. We grow to interpret or misinterpret ourselves solely in literary terms. In an attempt to escape from this fascile [sic] automatic label, we are driven to assume subtle and devious poses. The poses are nevertheless self-conscious, but necessary if one is to preserve one's sense of originality, of the integrity of one's ego. The entire process leads, paradoxically, to distortion rather than clarity of vision; we lose sight of what we and others really are.²¹

James Light has analyzed the way in which West "satirizes his influences while he reflects them," thus granting no immunity to his literary masters.²² The most prominent influences were Surrealism, Joyce, Dostoevsky, and Dada. West borrowed from Surrealism the dream structure and the idea of plumbing the unconscious in search of a reality beyond the facade of the commonplace. But Balso's journey refutes the spirituality of the unconscious. Balso's unconscious is simply the primeval slime. Similarly, West appropriates the journey of Bloom, the artistic idealism

21. Victor Comerchero, "Nathanael West: The Tuning Fork" (unpubl. diss., Iowa, 1961), pp. 98-99.

22. Light, p. 54.

of Dedalus, the metamorphoses of Nighttown, the rhetoric and word concern of the Gaelic bards, Molly Bloom's affirmation of the physical, and Joyce's concentration and use of leitmotif. But he parodies these as he employs them. Fyodor Dostoevsky tutored West in man's struggle against himself. But Dostoevsky took his themes seriously, while West is ambiguous. John Gilson reminds one of Raskolnikov, but he is no great compliment to the creator of that character. Finally, the dadaistic disgust, anti-intellectualism, obscurantism, and glorification of the physical, which Dada purveyed, show up in West. These attitudes are allowed to serve West's nihilism, but are ultimately satirized as pretentious in their own right.

West repays other literary debts in this same coin. A few further targets of his ambivalence are the ennui and sordid imagery of Baudelaire, the metamorphoses of Jurgen and The Waste Land, the case histories of Freud, the collective unconscious of Jung.

The structure of the book is linear and episodic, but it is also incremental and accelerative. The repeated attacks on artists and on religions, for instance, in various contexts have a cumulative effect. So, too, do the variations on the opposition of monism and pluralism. The acceleration is largely imitative of the progress of the dream towards its orgasm, through the quickened tempo of the later episodes.

All the characters of the novel, including Balso the journeyer, are aspects of Balso the dreamer. There is no attempt made at the consistent, rounded characterizations of the ordinary psychological novel. We do not remember John Gilson as an integrated person. However, we do remember his many faces and his literary creations. This is true of all the characters. West expended his skill in memorable caricatures, arranged cubistically. Gilson, the guide, Beagle Darwin, Miss McGeeney, and the rest have more than one face, and their faces are pasted almost arbitrarily to a name. More often than not, the two faces involved in a certain episode are arranged antithetically. And the sum of all the faces in the book is the universalized personality of Balso Snell. West's imagery is largely exercised in the creation of these faces. The images are conceits, extended, diminishing, and incongruous.

There are many parallels between West's writing and the art of certain painters. The principle of the conceit, discussed above, is the most prominent feature of the paintings of Max Ernst, de Chirico, Dali, (for example, the soft watches), among others. The caricatures are reminiscent of the daily comic page and of the bitter cartoons of George Grosz (although this is even more true in West's later work). I have already called attention to the cubistic arrangement of faces, joined by the

accident of space. I have mentioned the similarity to the fresco technique of Giotto. The anti-worldly tone of the work is, paradoxically, medieval. A tendency towards the apocalyptic canvases of Hieronymus Bosch and Breughel is carried to completion in The Day of the Locust.

To seize upon the uniqueness of West's nihilism it is helpful to compare his spirit with that of Dada. Dada was nihilistic, but directed its disgust at the past:

The beginnings of Dada were not the beginnings of an art, but of a disgust. Disgust with the magnificence of philosophers who for 3000 years have been explaining everything to us (what for?), disgust with the pretensions of these artists-God's-representatives-on-earth, disgust with passion and with real pathological wickedness where it was not worth the bother; disgust with a false form of domination and restriction en masse, that accentuates rather than appeases man's instinct of domination, disgust with all the catalogued categories, with the false prophets who are nothing but a front for the interests of money, pride, disease, disgust with the lieutenants of a mercantile art made to order according to a few infantile laws, disgust with the divorce of good and evil, the beautiful and the ugly (for why is it estimable to be red rather than green, to the left rather than the right, to be large or small?). Disgust finally with the Jesuitical dialectic which can explain everything and fill people's minds with oblique and obtuse ideas without any physiological basis or ethnic roots, all this by means of blinding artifice and ignoble charlatan's promises.²³

Dada was destruction, but it was destruction with a better future in mind. In the words of George Ribemont-Dessaignes, "It aimed at the liberation of the individual

23. Tristan Tzara, "Lecture on Dada (1920)," trans. by Ralph Manheim, in Robert Motherwell, ed., The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology (New York, 1951), p. 250.

from dogmas, formulas and laws, at the affirmation of the individual on the plane of the spiritual."²⁴ West's nihilism encompassed not merely 3000 years of history, but all the possibilities of life itself. For West, the future offered no hope, because neither the body nor the spirit offered meaning or value. West's nihilism was, therefore, absolute, whereas that of the Dadaists, as vigorous as it was, was relative.

West differed from the Dadaists in technique also. Dada placed great importance on chance:

To make a dadaist poem
 Take a newspaper.
 Take a pair of scissors.
 Choose an article as long as you are planning to make
 your poem.
 Cut out the article.
 Then cut out each of the words that make up this
 article and put them in a bag.
 Shake it gently.
 Then take out the scraps one after the other in the
 order in which they left the bag.
 Copy conscientiously.
 The poem will be like you.
 And here you are a writer, infinitely original and
 endowed with a sensibility that is charming beyond
 the understanding of the vulgar.²⁵

If we did not have biographical evidence of the extreme control which West exercised over his work, the complexity of the novel just examined would be sufficient proof of it. West gave his imagination free rein in conjuring up

24. George Ribemont-Dessaignes, "History of Dada," trans. by Ralph Manheim, in Motherwell, p. 102.

25. Tristan Tzara, "Dada Manifesto: 1918," trans. by Ralph Manheim, in Motherwell, p. 92.

the unusual, but the final product was the result of re-working and creative integration.

As far as the poses of the Dadaists themselves were concerned, it is interesting that one of the earliest made a statement very similar to John Gilson's defense of prostituted art:

It's quite simple: If I write, it is to infuriate my colleagues; to get myself talked about and to make a name for myself. A name helps you to succeed with women and in business. If I were as famous as Paul Bourget, I'd show myself in the Follies every night in a fig leaf and I assure you that I'd have a good box office.²⁶

In summary, then, The Dream Life of Balso Snell is an exercise in total nihilism cast in an ingenious nihilistic form. By means of his nihilistic dialectic, the author systematically disposes of the various contestants in the world's intellectual arena. By means of facetious allusions and the satirizing of his own models, he wages battle against literature, nullifying what might have been interpreted as positive elements in his own work. By linking his characters and situations to literary tradition, he exposes "real life" for as great a fiction as the novel itself. His attack is comprehensive and it is at one with the method in which it is carried on. But the book is also a first novel, and, as such, it has a further

26. Arthur Craven, "Exhibition at the Independents," trans. by Ralph Manheim, in Motherwell, p. 3.

interest as a proving ground for the talents which account for the eventual success of Miss Lonelyhearts and The Day of the Locust. West shows in Balso that penchant for caricature which he finally developed to a Dickensian fineness. Furthermore, all his later books employ a scenic or episodic technique similar to that of his first novel. His prose is, at the beginning as at the end, vulnerable to analysis only in terms of painting. And his comedy, though it varies somewhat from book to book, never compromises the cold eye of satire that so mercilessly exposes the human condition in Balso Snell. West need not have been ashamed of his first novel. It is not of the stature of Miss Lonelyhearts or The Day of the Locust, but it is an extraordinarily original work, and it is successful on its own terms.

CHAPTER III

THE SECOND COMING

Unlike The Dream Life of Balso Snell, West's second novel, Miss Lonelyhearts, attracted the attention of reviewers not only in the little magazines, but in publications of wide circulation as well. Writing in the Herald Tribune, Florence Haxton Britten termed it a "grotesquely beautiful novel"¹ and observed that the sexual descriptions reminded her of both Ben Hecht and the Dadaists. The reviewer for the Nation, although bothered by tendencies towards baroque prose and the confusion of the actual and the fanciful, decided in favor of the novel as "one of the most readable and one of the most exceptional books of the season."² In the New Yorker, Robert M. Coates wrote with urbane enthusiasm of "the crispest and cleverest, the most unusually ironical and sharply epigrammatic book I've read in months and months."³ While hailing it as "the really unusual novel of the recent

1. Florence Haxton Britten, "Grotesquely Beautiful Novel," New York Herald Tribune Books, IX (April 30, 1933), 6.

2. William Troy, "Four Newer Novelists," Nation, CXXXVI (June 14, 1933), 672-673.

3. Robert M. Coates, "Messiah of the Lonelyhearts," New Yorker, IX (April 15, 1933), 59.

past," T. C. Wilson, in the Saturday Review of Literature, coined the frequently quoted description of Lonelyhearts as "a kind of modernized, faithless Pilgrim's Progress."⁴ The New York Times summed up this favorable advance reception in its prophecy that "Miss Lonelyhearts stands to be one of the hits of the year, to win both popular and critical approval."⁵

An advertisement for Miss Lonelyhearts, published in Contempo, consisted of testimonials by Dashiell Hammett, Edmund Wilson, Erskine Caldwell, Robert Coates, and Josephine Herbst. Hammett observed that West struck "a new note in American writing; in his work there are no echoes of other men's books."⁶ Although there are influences discernible in all of West's books, it is true that none of them as a whole is quite like any previous book in American literature. Wilson tried to pinpoint the unique quality of the book:

It is hard to convey briefly what this book is like. It is not in the least like the work of even the best American humorous writers because Mr. West has a philosophic-poetic point of view which our humor usually lacks and because he has taken the trouble to turn out a finished and brilliant piece of writing.

4. T. C. Wilson, "American Humor," Saturday Review of Literature, IX (May 13, 1933), 599.

5. Unsigned, "'Miss Lonelyhearts' and Some Other Recent Works of Fiction," New York Times Book Review, XXXVII (April 23, 1933), 6.

6. Advertisement for Miss Lonelyhearts, Contempo, III (May 15, 1933), 7.

On the other hand, though he has evidently been influenced by the irony of Dada, he strains less and goes deeper than Dada. Mr. West is, in short, an original comic poet; and he has made of the misfortunes of a young newspaperman who edits a Miss Lonelyhearts department and takes the hard-luck letters seriously, a miniature comic epic.⁷

Erskine Caldwell was afraid that the book might be misunderstood:

Miss Lonelyhearts is a neat piece of work; in fact, it is so neat that it had me fooled for a while. I can easily imagine that the bulk of its audience will applaud it for being a clever and amusing novel, and I believe it will have a large audience; but to me it is a tragic story. I haven't read such good satire on life and living in this era of the twentieth century in a long time.⁸

Coates noted briefly that "Mr. West has a verbal agility that Cocteau well might envy, and a gift for fantastic metaphor that will have you so dazzled you won't be able to think of anyone else to compare him to."⁹ And Miss Herbst in her turn struggled to define the original tone of the novel:

Miss Lonelyhearts has the fascination of the dream or nightmare. That is not to say it is a fantastic book, it is concentrated reality. Extremely economic in form, its contents seem compressed to a high intensity of expression. With a running story that is full of action and reads swiftly as a detective story, you have a philosophical story of realistic New York, impressive by the very virtue of its chiselled

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

unpretentiousness. This story, apart from its extreme readability, is a sort of morality play in which characters stalk a little more conclusively than in life. The miserable contradictions of our times make webs for their feet, and the whole drama of man's wish for escape and solution runs through a book devoted to the story of a newspaper writer whose business is to salve broken lives.¹⁰

In a later issue, this same magazine published a group of reviews of Miss Lonelyhearts, all of them favorable. Angel Flores, remarking that Dostoevski and Cocteau have both been mentioned as predecessors of Miss Lonelyhearts, concludes that the book's appeal lies in its marriage of the psychological novel to the Gothic:

What my friend really meant was that peculiar nightmarish quality, that pervasive uncanniness which hovers over the canvasses /sic/ of Giorgio de Chirico and Salvador Dali. In literature it existed, coarsely, in the terrorists of the XVIIIth century, in the Walpole-Reeve-Radcliffe trio, and, more particularly, in Lewis' The Monk. Later it entered the chapel of the Symbolists via Coleridge, and now reigns, stylized, in surrealisme. Mystery saturates the finest works of the day. Ribemont-Dessaignes, Jouhandeau, Rene Char, Peret, Desnos, and to a lesser degree, Drieu la Rochelle and Henri Poulaille. And though at some distance from, say, Confiteor--one can sense it in such vastly different creations as Der Steppenwolf and Geheimnis eines Menschen . . .

Nathanael West's most remarkable performance has been to bring Fyodor's dark angels into the Haunted Castle. He did not recurr /sic/ to the drab realism which is so responsible for the stagnation in the works of the younger American writers--a realism which generally produces accurate reporting, easy-to-handle bulletins and timetables, and ALSO bad literature. Mr. West gives us anguish and terror and fantasy

10. Ibid.

(Dostoevsky-Ribemont-Dessaignes?) at the very crucial moment when the current vanguard taste insists on directing literature towards the casehistory, gravymashpotato tradition.¹¹

S. J. Perelman follows with the facetious portrait of West which I have quoted in part elsewhere in this study. Miss Herbst terms the book an allegory, but does not provide a key to its interpretation.¹² Bob Brown is almost hysterical in his praise of West and in his disparagement of the contemporary "pest of scribblers."¹³ He does not, however, succeed in articulating what it is he likes about West, except that he admires the ability to write a novel while running a big hotel. In the last review of this set, William Carlos Williams defends the book against the charge that it is sordid:

How much longer will it take, I wonder, for America to build up a cultural ice of sufficient thickness to bear a really first rate native author? It will happen sooner or later, it must, for we already have a few excellent craftsmen. But--to paraphrase the late Bert Williams--when? Apparently we still make the old and puerile error of finding a work, because its subject matter is unsmiling, serious or if the matter smiles then naturally the book must be light. And so, taking the sordid truth of city making and carrying the facts of the case through to an engrossing climax in a brilliant fashion, the book cannot be anything else but sordid also!¹⁴

11. Angel Flores, "Miss Lonelyhearts in the Haunted Castle," Contempo, III (July 25, 1933), 1.

12. Josephine Herbst, "Miss Lonelyhearts: An Allegory," Contempo, III (July 25, 1933), 4.

13. Bob Brown, "Go West, Young Writer," Contempo, III (July 25, 1933), 4-5.

14. William Carlos Williams, "Sordid? Good God!" Contempo, III (July 25, 1933), 5.

Although the reviewers were not always in agreement on particulars, they were almost unanimous in their praise of the book. Nor has there been a time since its publication at which Miss Lonelyhearts has not been highly thought of by many readers. When the British edition was released in 1949, it was lauded as exemplifying a strong point of view, "a flame in each of the dazzling sentences of his little book."¹⁵ Newsweek, in its review of the 1957 Complete Works, elevated Lonelyhearts and The Day of the Locust to the rank of "modern U. S. classics."¹⁶

In 1962, Stanley Edgar Hyman paid the highest tribute yet to Miss Lonelyhearts:

Miss Lonelyhearts seems to me one of the three finest novels of our century. The other two are F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby and Ernest Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises. It shares with them a lost and victimized hero, a bitter sense of our civilization's falsity, a pervasive melancholy atmosphere of failure and defeat. If the tone of Miss Lonelyhearts is more strident, its images more garish, its pace more rapid and hysterical, it is as fitting an epitome of the thirties as they are of the twenties. If nothing in the forties and fifties has similarly gone beyond Miss Lonelyhearts in violence and shock, it may be because it stands at the end of the line.¹⁷

These three great novels are alike in their scrupulous attention to technique. All three are largely scenic.

15. Michael Swan, "New Novels," New Statesman and Nation, XXXVIII (August 6, 1949), 153-154.

16. Unsigned, "Rubbing off the Sheen," Newsweek, XLIX (May 13, 1957), 127.

17. Stanley Edgar Hyman, Nathanael West (Minneapolis, 1962), p. 27.

Miss Lonelyhearts is entirely episodic, constructed out of fifteen short chapters, not always continuous in time as were the chapters of Balso Snell. Each chapter has a title, always beginning with the name, "Miss Lonelyhearts."

The first chapter is entitled "Miss Lonelyhearts, help me, help me." In the very first sentence the reader is given all he needs to know about Miss Lonelyhearts' occupation--an example of the economy that characterizes the novel:

The Miss Lonelyhearts of the New York Post-Dispatch (Are-you-in-trouble?--Do-you-need-advice?--Write-to-Miss-Lonelyhearts-and-she-will-help-you) sat at his desk and stared at a piece of white cardboard (p. 65).

On the cardboard is printed a prayer by his feature editor, Shrike:

Soul of Miss L, glorify me
Body of Miss L, nourish me
Blood of Miss L, intoxicate me
Tears of Miss L, wash me.
Oh good Miss L, excuse my plea,
And hide me in your heart,
And defend me from mine enemies.
Help me, Miss L, help me, help me.
In saecula saeculorum. Amen (pp. 65-66).

In this prayer, a parody of the Anima Christi of Loyola's Spiritual Exercises,¹⁸ West anticipates the identification of Miss Lonelyhearts with Christ, insinuates the cynical irreligion of Shrike before that character even arrives on the scene, and establishes a thematic continuity with

18. Victor Comerchero, "Nathanael West: The Tuning Fork" (unpubl. diss., Iowa, 1961), p. 18.

Balso Snell, in which the same prayer was parodied in the tale of St. Puce.

Miss Lonelyhearts is rushing to meet his deadline. What he has written is too hackneyed for even such an indiscriminating audience as his own: "Life is worth while, for it is full of dreams and peace, gentleness and ecstasy, and faith that burns like a clear white flame on a grim dark altar" (p. 66). The hollowness of the platitudes affirms West's own thesis, that life is not worth living.

The hack is no longer able to crank out his column with dispatch. He has lost his detachment, his sense of the comic:

The letters were no longer funny. He could not go on finding the same joke funny thirty times a day for months on end. And on most days he received more than thirty letters, all of them alike, stamped from the dough of suffering with a heart-shaped cookie knife (p. 66).

The situation of a sensitive, male Miss Lonelyhearts would in itself be enough to strike the reader's fancy. West enlarges his advantage by the simple scheme of reproducing three of the suppliants' letters. If the letters had failed to communicate the exact blend of pathos and comedy, West's tale would have been seriously weakened at the start. But they are a success. The first exploits practically every possible error in spelling, punctuation, grammar, and diction. Its

anti-climactic style is the reverse of effective rhetoric, especially in the aimless coordination and subordination. Yet the letter does not fail to communicate the suffering of the correspondent:

Dear Miss Lonelyhearts:

I am in such pain I don't know what to do sometimes I think I will kill myself my kidneys hurt so much. My husband thinks no woman can be a good catholic and not have children irregardless of the pain. I was married honorable from our church but I never knew what married life meant as I never was told about man and wife. My grandmother never told me and she was the only mother I had but made a mistake by not telling me as it don't pay to be innocent and is only a big disapointment. I have 7 children in 12 yrs and ever since the last 2 I have been so sick. I was operatered on twice and my husband promised no more children on the doctors advice as he said I might die but when I got back from the hospital he broke his promise and now I am going to have a baby and I don't think I can stand it my kidneys hurt so much. I am so sick and scared because I cant have an abortion on account of being a catholic and my husband so religious. I cry all the time it hurts so much and I dont know what to do (pp. 66-67).

West suggests that if Miss Lonelyhearts were not so wrapped up in his job, he could learn two very pertinent lessons from this letter. First of all, "it dont pay to be innocent and is only a big disapointment." Secondly, religion, rather than alleviating human suffering, often complicates it.

The first letter was from "Sick-of-it-all"; the second is signed "Desperate":

I am sixteen years old and I don't know what to do and would appreciate it if you could tell me what to do. When I was a little girl it was not so bad because I got used to the kids on the block makeing fun of me, but now I would like to have boy friends like the other girls and go out on Saturday nites, but no boy will take me because I was born without a nose--although I am a good dancer and have a nice shape and my father buys me pretty clothes.

I sit and look at myself all day and cry. I have a big hole in the middle of my face that scares people even myself so I cant blame the boys for not wanting to take me out. My mother loves me, but she crys terrible when she looks at me.

What did I do to deserve such a terrible bad fate? Even if I did do some bad things I didnt do any before I was a year old and I was born this way. I asked Papa and he says he doesnt know, but that maybe I did something in the other world before I was born or that maybe I was being punished for his sins. I dont believe that because he is a very nice man. Ought I commit suicide? (p. 67).

This letter, written by a more intelligent correspondent, represents an advance from the practical to the teleological level. The first letter asks "What shall I do?" The second, although toying with suicide, is more concerned with the question, "Why was this done to me?" West shows that the child is not fooled by Original Sin or other rationalizations of evil. As religion is the source of the first woman's woes, sex, or at least the social relationship, is Desperate's problem. She could get by without a nose until she reached puberty.

The third letter, from "Harold S.," is also a lament against sex and society:

I am writing to you for my little sister Gracie because something awfull hapened to her and I am afraid to tell mother about it. I am

15 years old and Gracie is 13 and we live in Brooklyn. Gracie is deaf and dumb and bigger than me but not very smart on account of being deaf and dumb. She plays on the roof of our house and dont go to school except to deaf and dumb school twice a week on tuesdays and thursdays. Mother makes her play on the roof because we dont want her to get run over as she aint very smart. Last week a man came on the roof and did something dirty to her. She told me about it and I dont know what to do as I am afraid to tell mother on account of her being liable to beat Gracie up. I am afraid that Gracie is going to have a baby and I listened to her stomach last night for a long time to see if I could hear the baby but I couldn't. If I tell mother she will beat Gracie up awfull because I am the only one who loves her and the last time when she tore her dress they loked her in the closet for 2 days and if the boys on the block hear about it they will say dirty things like they did on Peewee Conors sister the time she got caught in the lots. So please what would you do if the same hapened in your family (p. 68).

West may have taken his inspiration for this incident from the fathering of Smerdyakov on an idiot woman in The Brothers Karamazov. If so, the comparison points up a major difference in tone between the two writers. Where Dostoevsky is passionately serious about human suffering, West never reacts with pure sympathy or horror, unalloyed by laughter at human absurdity.

Together, the letters imply that much of man's misery can be blamed on religion, society, and human nature. Since suffering is the complex universal of human existence, it is useless to search for a simple answer. Yet, West implies, that is what these people are seeking--a magic answer. They think that Lonelyhearts may

be the answer (because he is advertised as such). Lonelyhearts knows better, but in his anxiety to help them he too turns to oversimplification:

Christ was the answer, but, if he did not want to get sick, he had to stay away from the Christ business. Besides, Christ was Shrike's particular joke (p. 68).

West now relinquishes Lonelyhearts' viewpoint in favor of a long view of his protagonist:

Although his cheap clothes had too much style, he still looked like the son of a Baptist minister. A beard would become him, would accent his Old-Testament look. But even without a beard no one could fail to recognize the New England puritan. His forehead was high and narrow. His nose was long and fleshless. His bony chin was shaped and cleft like a hoof. On seeing him for the first time, Shrike had smiled and said, "The Susan Chesters, the Beatrice Fairfaxes and the Miss Lonelyhearts are the priests of twentieth-century America" (p. 69).

All of West's descriptions, whether of people or of settings, are based on the assumption that the external reality is an expression of the internal reality, the sur-reality. This may not be a strictly mimetic principle, but it is the basis of all pictorial art which aims at more than mere physical representation. In this case, the description of Lonelyhearts' physiognomy reveals the angular austerity of a prophet, a puritan, a minister, a priest, and, perhaps, a devil. These faces are juxtaposed cubistically, partially merging, partially distinguishable. The union of faces from many historical eras serves first of all to establish Lonelyhearts as a universal type--the

man of primitive religious feeling. It serves secondly to give a diabolic aspect to this type, as if its fruits might well be poison.

Now Shrike enters from the wings. He suggests that Lonelyhearts might offer his readers a new hope, Art:

"Art is a Way Out.

"Do not let life overwhelm you. When the old paths are choked with the debris of failure, look for newer and fresher paths. Art is just such a path. Art is distilled from suffering. As Mr. Polnikoff exclaimed through his fine Russian beard when, at the age of eighty-six, he gave up his business to learn Chinese, 'We are, as yet, only at the beginning. . . .'"

"Art Is One of Life's Richest Offerings.

"For those who have not the talent to create, there is appreciation. For those . . .

"Go on from there" (p. 69).

Coming on the heels of the illiteracy of the letters, Shrike's advice is properly ludicrous.

I have quoted heavily from this first chapter because there is scarcely a sentence that is not of the utmost importance in establishing a foundation for the novel. In this respect, the chapter is even more economical than the first chapter of Balso Snell. The protagonist and antagonist are sketched in essence. The tragicomedy of the newspaper column is made palpable. And in order to sweep up any of the debris left over from the demolition of Balso, Art is dismissed in the first of Shrike's monologues.

Two of the most successful aspects of West's craftsmanship are evident here. The first is his deft

exploitation of all the possibilities of third-person narration. West gives us his hero's thoughts, sees the world through the hero's eyes, steps back for a close-up of the hero or for a long shot of the hero in his environment, or simply presents a scene in objective dramatic form. His manipulation of the fictional camera with very little elbow room probably aided in his later success as a screenwriter. One is never jarred by a change of viewpoint, yet West never artificially restricts the scope of his narration. His second talent is that of particularization. It is the talent of a writer who is willing to take time and deal in miniatures. West painstakingly elaborates the texts of the letters, Shrike's note, the description of Lonelyhearts. He could have slipped by with much less. One is apt to skim through the details of the letters and portraits and monologues on a first reading. It is for this reason, among others, that Miss Lonelyhearts grows in the imagination with successive readings. On the other hand, there are no superfluous details in West. He does not waste words on mere documentation nor does he intrude incongruous symbols. When he describes a dwelling, for instance, the place is always some sort of key to the person who lives in it.

This concentration is evident in the title of the second chapter, "Miss Lonelyhearts and the dead pan." The latter phrase refers to the comic immobility of Shrike's

face. It seems likely, however, as James Light has pointed out, that West also intended the reading, "the dead god Pan."¹⁹ The content of the chapter is sexually toned, but the sexuality is of a sterile, self-deprecating nature.

This reading is supported by the imagery of the chapter. Miss Lonelyhearts, on his way to Delehanty's speakeasy after work, impales himself on a glaring phallic symbol:

He entered the park at the North Gate and swallowed mouthfuls of the heavy shade that curtained its arch. He walked into the shadow of a lamp-post that lay on the path like a spear. It pierced him like a spear (p. 70).

This seems to be a descent into an erotic Hades, land of dead satyrs. The park itself, which might in another novel be used as a symbol of regeneration, an oasis in the concrete desert of a modern metropolis, is here described as an unmistakable waste land:

As far as he could discover, there were no signs of spring. The decay that covered the surface of the mottled ground was not the kind in which life generates. Last year, he remembered, May had failed to quicken these soiled fields. It had taken all the brutality of July to torture a few green spikes through the exhausted dirt.

What the little park needed, even more than he did, was a drink. Neither alcohol nor rain would do. To-morrow, in his column, he would ask Broken-hearted, Sick-of-it-all, Desperate, Disillusioned-with-tubercular-husband and the rest of his correspondents to come here and water the soil with their tears. Flowers would then spring up, flowers that smelled of feet (p. 70).

19. Light, p. 82.

As Edmund Volpe has observed, the difference between Eliot's Waste Land and West's is that "in Eliot's Waste Land regeneration is possible; in West's there is no hope of salvation."²⁰

A single allusion, in the manner of Balso Snell, "Ah, humanity . . .," escapes Lonelyhearts, but "he was heavy with shadow and the joke went into a dying fall" (p. 70). Like Beagle Darwin, he laughs at himself. He reflects that Shrike will be willing to monopolize such mockery. He remembers one of Shrike's monologues that contains a symbol of mortification:

"Miss Lonelyhearts, my friend, I advise you to give your readers stones. When they ask for bread don't give them crackers as does the Church, and don't, like the State, tell them to eat cake. Explain that man cannot live by bread alone and give them stones. Teach them to pray each morning: 'Give us this day our daily stone'" (pp. 70-71).

The stone is both the platitude hardened by age and the personality solidified by suffering or obsession. West is already feeling the symptoms of this latter insensitivity: "He had given his readers many stones; so many, in fact, that he had only one left--the stone that had formed in his gut" (p. 71). Surely, though, the sky must contain an emblem of some significance, something to fix upon for equilibrium, a "target":

20. Edmund L. Volpe, "The Waste Land of Nathanael West," Renascence, XIII (Winter, 1961), 112.

But the gray sky looked as if it had been rubbed with a soiled eraser. It held no angels, flaming crosses, olive-bearing doves, wheels within wheels. Only a newspaper struggled in the air like a kite with a broken spine (p. 71).

The newspaper is the emblem of twentieth-century ephemerality and relativity. It is also that organ of the masses in which Lonelyhearts, by profession, is personally involved.

At the speakeasy he is plagued by Shrike. Shrike eulogizes the renaissance, not as the cradle of science, but as the age of drunken popes and courtesans, the age of this-worldliness as opposed to Christian other-worldliness. West describes the cynic's physiognomy:

Although his gestures were elaborate, his face was blank. He practiced a trick used much by moving-picture comedians--the dead pan. No matter how fantastic or excited his speech, he never changed his expression. Under the shining white globe of his brow, his features huddled together in a dead, gray triangle (p. 72).

Like Beagle Darwin, Shrike meets every situation with a single mask--that of the cynic. He has no other offense, no other defense. Fortunately for him, his amoral armor is almost impenetrable.

Shrike announces that he is awaiting a girl friend of great intelligence, and he illustrates "the word intelligence by carving two enormous breasts in the air with his hands" (p. 72). Lonelyhearts allows his annoyance to show, on which Shrike turns upon him:

"Oh, so you don't care for women, eh? J. C. is your only sweetheart, eh? Jesus Christ, the King of Kings, the Miss Lonelyhearts of Miss Lonelyhearts. . . ." (p. 72).

Lonelyheart's repulsion and Shrike's subsequent accusation are the first hints that Lonelyhearts has homosexual tendencies. Ironically, the description of Shrike's mistress, Miss Farkis, suggests that both she and Shrike may also be inverted. She greets Lonelyhearts with "a masculine handshake" and is described in masculine terms:

She had long legs, thick ankles, big hands, a powerful body, a slender neck and a childish face made tiny by a man's haircut (p. 72).

The sexual sterility of the characters is paralleled by their perversion of religion. Miss Farkis, like a true bookshop clerk, is intellectually intrigued by "the new thomistic synthesis," while Shrike displays a newspaper clipping of a plan to offer prayers for a condemned man on an adding machine. Of course, Lonelyhearts' own concept of religious mysticism is equally far removed from the rationalism of St. Thomas and the ultra-modernity of the adding machine sect. His religion is the Imitation of Christ, with an emphasis on the immolation.

Later, in the back room, Shrike intones a seduction speech that serves as smokescreen for his caresses, while, in the manner of logical positivism, he rejects the soul as non-verifiable and acclaims the body:

"I am a great saint," Shrike cried, "I can walk on my own water. Haven't you ever heard of Shrike's Passion in the Luncheonette, or the Agony in the Soda Fountain? Then I compared the wounds in Christ's body to the mouths of a miraculous purse in which we deposit the small change of our sins. It is indeed an excellent conceit. But now let us consider the holes in our own bodies and into what these congenital wounds open. Under the skin of man is a wondrous jungle where veins like lush tropical growths hand along overripe organs and weed-like entrails writhe in squirming tangles of red and yellow. In this jungle, flitting from rock-gray lungs to golden intestines, from liver to lights and back to liver again, lives a bird called the soul. The Catholic hunts this bird with bread and wine, the Hebrew with a golden ruler, the Protestant on leaden feet with leaden words, the Buddhist with gestures, the Negro with blood. I spit on them all. Phooch! And I call upon you to spit. Phooch! Do you stuff birds? No, my dears, taxidermy is not religion. No! A thousand times no. Better, I say unto you, better a live bird in the jungle of the body than two stuffed birds on the library table" (p. 74).

Mission accomplished, Shrike "buried his triangular face like the blade of a hatchet in her neck" (p. 74).

Pan is certainly dead. Miss Lonelyhearts is made nervous by sex; Miss Farkis is masculine; and Shrike is sadistic. Religion no longer issues in either fertility rites or in the liberation of the spirit; rather it is a ploy in barren seductions.

The third chapter, "Miss Lonelyhearts and the Lamb," begins, like the second chapter, with the protagonist alone. He has returned to his ascetic apartment. On the wall is nailed with spikes an ivory Christ, an unlikely icon for the son of a Baptist preacher and

another symptom of his sadism. He takes The Brothers Karamazov to bed and reads a passage in which Father Zossima proposes universal love as the means of ascent to the divine. Lonelyhearts cannot realize this love emotionally; he finds himself, in fact, joking in the manner of a Shrike.

The denigration of the Christ-dream is not, however, all Shrike's doing. Lonelyhearts had toyed with the emotive force of Christ even as a child, but he had always held it in check. West makes it clear that Christ, for Lonelyhearts, is simply an expressive symbol, a trigger for a complex of repressed energies, a sort of hallucinogen:

He knew what this thing was--hysteria, a snake whose scales were tiny mirrors in which the dead world takes on a semblance of life. And how dead the world is . . . a world of doorknobs. He wondered if hysteria were really too steep a price to pay for bringing it to life (p. 75).

Christ, for Lonelyhearts, is excitement, a stimulant, a gusher in his subjective waste land. He can unleash this hysteria by means of the chant: "Christ, Christ, Jesus Christ, Christ, Christ Jesus Christ," but he does not dare.

He falls asleep and dreams of an incident that may or may not have actually taken place during his college days. He and two buddies are up late arguing the existence of God. On their way to buy some bootleg applejack, they

decide to buy a lamb to roast in the woods. Lonelyhearts stipulates that they must first sacrifice it to God. He volunteers to do the honors and intones the chant. At the height of frenzy, he brings down the knife and botches the job, in exactly the manner that Gilson messed up the decapitation of the idiot dishwasher. The lamb escapes, half-dead. Later, when his excitement has subsided, Lonelyhearts goes back alone and kills the lamb. Whether the dream is a real memory or rather a pure creation of the unconscious, its meaning is clear--Lonelyhearts instinctively fears and represses the psychosexual Christ-complex.

The parallel to John Raskolnikov Gilson, that precocious schizophrenic, is not incidental. West is gradually implying that Lonelyhearts too is a sadomasochist with homosexual tendencies and a rapidly splintering personality. Not only does the Christ-chant release his pent-up sexuality, but his religious obsession is, most likely, partially pathological in origin.

The sacrificial tableau is one of the memorable scenes in the book. It is Dostoevskian in that it brings the reader rudely face to face with those aspects of human nature which are usually kept tightly sealed in the vaults of the unconscious. It is not necessary for West to rely on turns of phrase to liven the scene. The action itself is potent. This is, moreover, one of the few

revelations from Lonelyhearts' early life, if we can allow it some authenticity. It is enough to demonstrate that the events of the novel are not due to some sudden change in Lonelyhearts' mentality; they are the result of long-standing psychological peculiarities.

The chapter tells us something important about West's method, about his mixture of realism and fantasy. The slaying of the lamb is an improbable deed, especially in the ritualistic manner in which Lonelyhearts insists on executing it. But one is not apt to notice its improbability on a first, second, or third reading. The details of the event are so convincing--the collegiate argument about God; the spur-of-the-moment excursion for booze; the botching of the killing itself; the flight--that our belief is compelled. Because the preparation for the deed was carefully documented, and because the continuity of the scene was not allowed to lag, the sacrifice of a lamb by three college boys is both plausible and disturbing. Because of West's method of particularization, he has been praised for his realism and fantasy alike.

In "Miss Lonelyhearts and the fat thumb," Miss Lonelyhearts is suffering from a compulsion neurosis with metaphysical implications:

Miss Lonelyhearts found himself developing an almost insane sensitiveness to order. Everything had to form a pattern: the shoes under the bed, the ties in the holder, the pencils on the table. When he looked out of a window, he

composed the skyline by balancing one building against another. If a bird flew across this arrangement, he closed his eyes angrily until it was gone (p. 78).

He is able to manipulate the universe into some sort of subjective order. One day, however, he loses control:

On that day all the inanimate things over which he had tried to obtain control took the field against him. When he touched something, it spilled or rolled to the floor. The collar buttons disappeared under the bed, the point of the pencil broke, the handle of the razor fell off, the window shade refused to stay down. He fought back, but with too much violence, and was decisively defeated by the spring of the alarm clock (p. 78).

Out on the street, the chaos is multiplied. He can give it neither rhythm nor meaning. With his back against the wall, he thinks of his girl-friend, Betty: "She had often made him feel that when she straightened his tie, she straightened much more" (p. 79).

Betty's wholesome appearance is at first soothing to him. He soon returns to his senses:

Her world was not the world and could never include the readers of his column. Her sureness was based on the power to limit experience arbitrarily. Moreover, his confusion was significant, while her order was not (p. 79).

The "fat thumb" of the title is Lonelyhearts' tongue. He is inarticulate when with Betty. The reader learns that he is returning to her after a separation. As nearly perfect a girl as she is, she inevitably irritates him. Her Buddha-like posture suggests all the health,

wholesomeness, and normality that Lonelyhearts does not possess or even want.

West explains that Lonelyhearts has not seen Betty since a night two months ago when they had decided to marry and had planned their life together. He had not returned because he had had to admit to himself that such a solution to his problems was impossible.

Lonelyhearts is not gentle at love. He seems not to enjoy it. He tugs at Betty's nipple; when she inquires if he is sick, he replies histrionically:

"What a kind bitch you are. As soon as anyone acts viciously, you say he's sick. Wife-torturers, rapers of small children, according to you they're all sick. No morality, only medicine. Well, I'm not sick. I don't need any of your damned aspirin. I've got a Christ-complex. Humanity . . . I'm a humanity lover. All the broken bastards . . ."
(p. 81).

This is the first time Lonelyhearts has specifically named his affliction. Significantly, his voice fails him when he tries to attribute his disorder to love of humanity. Love of humanity, Zossima's universal love, is precisely what he is never able to feel. Pity, yes; love, no. In fact, he is not even able to love Betty, not even able to be nice to her. When she twice tells him that she loves him, he replies, "'And I love you. . . . You and your damned smiling through tears'" (p. 81). The reader can only sympathize with Betty's answer to this counterfeit Christ: "Why don't you let me alone. . . . I felt swell

before you came, and now I feel lousy. Go away. Please go away" (p. 82).

This scene is in the manner of Dostoevsky. In his works pre-eminently love and cruelty are joined. It is true that Betty's artificially ordered world is unsatisfactory for a person of Lonelyhearts' intelligence. But it is also true, as Coleridge illustrated in his "Dejection: An Ode," that a disordered subjectivity will color the world gray. The world is out of kilter, both inside and outside of Lonelyhearts. As a modern Christ, he may be expected to succour the needy, not to demand help of his inferiors and then turn viciously upon them. The paradox of Miss Lonelyhearts' vocation is coming more steadily into focus: even if it were possible to relieve the sufferings of the world, Lonelyhearts would be the least effective agent one could choose because he is not even able to put his own house in order. He has nothing to give others; he is a Christ without love.

The fifth chapter, "Miss Lonelyhearts and the clean old man," is a thorough exposition of sadism. Lonelyhearts returns to Delehanty's where a group of his friends are lamenting the proliferation of women writers with three names. The men relieve their antagonisms with a round of stories about rape:

"I knew a gal who was regular until she fell in with a group and went literary. She began writing for the little magazines about how much

beauty hurt her and ditched the boy friend who set up pins in a bowling alley. The guys on the block got sore and took her into the lots one night. About eight of them. They ganged her proper. . . ."

"That's like the one they tell about another female writer. When this hard-boiled stuff first came in, she dropped the trick English accent and went in for scram and lam. She got to hanging around with a lot of mugs in a speak, gathering material for a novel. Well, the mugs didn't know they were picturesque and thought she was regular until the barkeep put them wise. They got her into the back room to teach her a new word and put the boots to her. They didn't let her out for three days. On the last day they sold tickets to niggers. . . ." (pp. 82-83).

Their peculiar anti-feminism reveals both sexual and literary frustrations, as well as a possibly universal sadism that seeks expression through this genre of male humor. At the same time, these men are not unsympathetic characters. Their intelligence and good-fellowship show through their assumed hardness. Lonelyhearts finds their nonsense poignant, because he knows it is the last stage of a pathetic but inevitable fall from grace:

At college, and perhaps for a year afterwards, they had believed in literature, had believed in Beauty and in personal expression as an absolute end. When they lost this belief, they lost everything. Money and fame meant nothing to them. They were not worldly men (p. 83).

They are, even in the inferno of Delehanty's, superior to Lonelyhearts' correspondents, who have never aspired.

Lonelyhearts, however, has already traveled beyond even these disillusioned savants. He has begun his

withdrawal from reality. In a prophetic passage, West describes this state of self-containment:

He was smiling an innocent, amused smile, the smile of an anarchist sitting in the movies with a bomb in his pocket. If the people around him only knew what was in his pocket. In a little while he would leave to kill the president (p. 83).

Facetiously, the men begin to analyze Lonelyhearts' religious fixation. They complain that he is a masochistic leper-licker, that he is infatuated by the ceremonial trappings of religion, that he has no outer life, that he is an escapist, that he is interested in religion only for self-development. Ironically, all their gibes have a grain of truth. One statement is particularly relevant to Lonelyhearts' demise:

"Even if he were to have a genuine religious experience it would be personal and so meaningless, except to a psychologist" (p. 83).

Lonelyhearts enjoys them, although he can only pity their obsession with humor as a last resort. He calls them joke-machines; their masculine joviality, like Shrike's cynicism and Betty's composure, is an oversimplified answer to a complicated problem.

Under the soothing influence of the whiskey, he realizes how slight an obstacle their laughter is to his Christ-Dream. In his euphoria, he recalls a day in his childhood when he played Mozart and his sister danced to it. It is a vision of innocent, musical symmetry, not unlike Betty's world:

As Miss Lonelyhearts stood at the bar, swaying slightly to the remembered music, he thought of children dancing. Square replacing oblong and being replaced by circle. Every child, everywhere; in the whole world there was not one child who was not gravely, sweetly dancing (pp. 84-85).

This harmonic interlude is interrupted by a punch in the mouth, as Lonelyhearts dreamily bumps into the man next to him. The provocation is indeed slight, but this is a world of people who respond violently to human contact.

When he recovers, he goes for a walk with Ned Gates through the park. In the midst of the waste land, they discover an old man warming himself in the comfort station. They force him to accompany them to an Italian cellar, where their interrogation of the man is tasteless and humorless. Every indication of the man's homosexuality is an intolerable goad to Lonelyhearts. Eventually, in a desperate effort to extract the man's life story, Lonelyhearts twists his arm viciously:

He was twisting the arm of all the sick and miserable, broken and betrayed, inarticulate and impatient. He was twisting the arm of Desperate, Broken-hearted, Sick-of-it-all, Disillusioned-with-tubercular-husband (p. 88).

He is also twisting his own arm. There is no explanation for the extremity of his treatment of the old man except that he is punishing his own guilt over a repressed homosexuality which he projects upon the old man. After all, the only evidence of the man's homosexuality is his giggling and squirming when he is removed bodily from the

lavatory. He does not make advances; he does not assert himself offensively. He receives their accusations with indignation. Most importantly, he does not beg for pity, as do the correspondents. He only breaks down under the harshest persecution. Therefore, the man's homosexuality is not conspicuous. What is conspicuous is that Lonelyhearts' sadism is rooted in his homosexuality.

Lonelyhearts, then, fails again to put his Christian charity into practice. He is not even a good Samaritan. Ironically, the "rape" of the chapter is of a man.

In chapter six, "Miss Lonelyhearts and Mrs. Shrike," a badly hungover mystic misses work. He is not afraid that he will be fired; that would spoil Shrike's fun and it would be too easy an escape for Lonelyhearts. Presumably he still believes at this point that his Christ-complex would recede into his fatty unconscious if only he could get away from the job. Walking through the park, he decides to rest across from the phallic obelisk:

The stone shaft cast a long, rigid shadow on the walk in front of him. He sat staring at it without knowing why until he noticed that it was lengthening in rapid jerks, not as shadows usually lengthen. He grew frightened and looked up quickly at the monument. It seemed red and swollen in the dying sun, as though it were about to spout a load of granite seed (p. 89).

No one is likely to mistake the import of this hallucination; even Lonelyhearts takes the hint. He makes a date

with Mary Shrike, the boss's wife, and goes to her house to pick her up.

This entanglement is another of the blatant improbabilities of the book; yet it yields one of the most convincing and engrossing incidents. It is plausible because the members of this triangle are all sadomasochistic. In Shrike's home, the relationships of the office are inverted. Here he is not the terrorizer, but the sexually frustrated. Lonelyhearts, who is Shrike's butt in the office, takes a measure of revenge in going out with his wife. Shrike does not object, partly because his wife is more than a match for him, partly because he takes a masochistic pleasure in his humiliation, partly because it is only after Mary has been warmed up by her other men that he is able to seduce her. Lonelyhearts' revenge is not complete because he has been unable to persuade Mary to sleep with him. And, as might be expected, Lonelyhearts is not very excited by normal relations with women: "Like a dead man, only friction could make him warm or violence make him mobile" (p. 90). He tries to excite himself by thinking of Mary's breasts. When he fails, West gives the most definite indication yet of Lonelyhearts' abnormality:

But the excitement refused to come. If anything, he felt colder than before he had started to think of women. It was not his line. Nevertheless, he persisted in it, out of

desperation, and went to the phone to call Mary (p. 90).

Mary is glad to hear from him because she has had a fight with Shrike. But when Lonelyhearts arrives at her apartment, he finds Shrike home. In response to Shrike's embarrassing remarks on Lonelyhearts' familiarity with his wife, Lonelyhearts lamely accuses Shrike of being mean to Mary. Shrike drops his mask for the first and only time in the novel:

Here the dead pan broke and pain actually crept into his voice. "She's selfish. She's a damned selfish bitch. She was a virgin when I married her and has been fighting ever since to remain one. Sleeping with her is like sleeping with a knife in one's groin" (p. 92).

With the instinct of a wild animal, Lonelyhearts tears at his enemy's wound: "It was Lonelyhearts' turn to laugh. He put his face close to Shrike's and laughed as hard as he could" (p. 92).

Lonelyhearts takes Mary to the El Gaucho. In the Hollywood atmosphere, his reflections are similar to Tod Hackett's in Locust:

What had happened to his great understanding heart? Guitars, bright shawls, exotic foods, outlandish costumes--all these things were part of the business of dreams. He had learned not to laugh at the advertisements offering to teach writing, cartooning, engineering, to add inches to the biceps and develop the bust. He should therefore realize that the people who came to the El Gaucho were the same as those who wanted to write and live the life of an artist, wanted to be an engineer and wear leather puttees, wanted to develop a grip that would impress the boss, wanted

to cushion Raoul's head on their swollen breasts. They were the same people as those who wrote to Miss Lonelyhearts for help (p. 94).

They are, in other words, the bored and cheated "starers" of The Day of the Locust.

Lonelyhearts despises all dreams inferior to the Christ-Dream, but Mary feels right at home in the nightclub because she is herself a creature of illusions. One of these illusions is that it is possible to be "gay." Another is that her parents led "poetic" lives. She wears around her neck an award medallion for first place in the 100-yard dash at Boston Latin School. Besides being incongruous and masculine, the medal also seems to indicate that Mary is an escapist. Her frigidity, for instance, certainly represents a running away from reality.

In the cab home, Miss Lonelyhearts caresses her body and begs her to sleep with him. Outside her apartment door, he goes wild with violent sexuality, while she talks nonsense in a monotone, so that Shrike will not suspect they are kissing. The violence of the man and the delusion of the woman are counterpointed in an image of self-revelation:

"My mother died of cancer of the breast," she said in a brave voice, like a little girl reciting at a party. "She died leaning over a table. My father was a portrait painter. He led a very gay life. He mistreated my mother. She had cancer of the breast. She . . ." He tore at her clothes and she began to mumble and repeat herself. Her dress fell to her feet and he tore away her

underwear until she was naked under her fur coat. He tried to drag her to the floor (p. 96).

This is the acting out of the impulse to rape that motivated the humor in Delehanty's. It is that violence which alone can bring Lonelyhearts to life. But it is not completed. Mary goes inside promising to let Lonelyhearts in if her husband is not home. But moments later Shrike appears at the door, dressed only in the tops to his pajamas.

Of this scene, Stanley Edgar Hyman says, "It is the child's Oedipal vision perfectly dramatized: he can clutch at his mother's body but loses her each time to his more potent rival."²¹ On this and other evidence, some of which we have already noted, Hyman projects Lonelyhearts' unhappy childhood:

We could, if we so chose, write Miss Lonelyhearts's case history before the novel begins. Terrified of his stern religious father, identifying with his soft loving mother, the boy renounces his phallicism out of castration anxiety--a classic Oedipal complex. In these terms the Shrikes are Miss Lonelyhearts' Oedipal parents, abstracted as the father's loud voice and the mother's tantalizing breast.²²

This was not the case with West's own parents. Hyman's reading, nevertheless, is entirely consistent with the other evidence of Lonelyhearts' psychological history.

21. Hyman, p. 23.

22. Ibid., p. 22.

These first six chapters mark the exposition of the "tragedy." Lonelyhearts is not yet involved in the train of events that will carry him to his doom; the volatile situation, however, has been prepared in the involvement of this psychologically unstable person with the insoluble problems of the correspondents. All that is needed to start the reaction is a catalyst.

The catalyst is provided in the seventh chapter, "Miss Lonelyhearts on a field trip." Lonelyhearts sits at his desk, imagining the plight of the letter-writers in terms of a surrealistic painting. They must live in an unglamorous desert, surrounded by a fence with news bulletins upon it. Inside the fence the correspondents are forming the name "Miss Lonelyhearts" upon the ground with clam shells. He is interrupted by Goldsmith, a fellow journalist, who has written the column in Lonelyhearts' absence. Goldsmith gives him a letter from "An admirer/Fay Doyle." She is a thirty-two year old woman married to a cripple and she wants to talk to Lonelyhearts in person. He has been pointed out to her in Delehanty's.

Unable to crank out any more drivel, he calls and arranges to meet her immediately, nourishing an outside chance that her sensuality will bring him to life:

He thought of Mrs. Doyle as a tent, hair-covered and veined, and of himself as the skeleton in a water closet, the skull and cross-bones on a scholar's bookplate. When

he made the skeleton enter the flesh tent, it flowered at every joint (p. 99).

Appropriately enough, he waits for her near the obelisk, which is by now a sort of rabbit's foot for his sex life, and a generally ineffective token. This time, however, he is more occupied with the skyscrapers along the skyline. He forms a theory to account for his spiritual exhaustion:

Americans have dissipated their radical energy in an orgy of stone breaking. In their few years they have broken more stones than did centuries of Egyptians. And they have done their work hysterically, desperately, almost as if they knew that the stones would some day break them (p. 100).

When Mrs. Doyle arrives, she exceeds his most pessimistic expectations:

He made a quick catalogue: legs like Indian clubs, breasts like balloons and a brow like a pigeon. Despite her short plaid skirt, red sweater, rabbit-skin jacket and knitted tam-o'shanter, she looked like a police captain (p. 100).

Mrs. Doyle is not merely masculine; she is a veritable beast of prey. In Lonelyhearts' apartment, she goes for him at once. Significantly, he "now found a strange pleasure in having the roles reversed" (p. 101). He is cowed by her undressing, an occasion for one of West's finest descriptions:

She made sea sounds; something flapped like a sail; there was the creak of ropes; then he heard the wave-against-a-wharf smack of rubber on flesh. Her call to him to hurry was a sea-moan, and when he lay beside her, she heaved, tidal, moon-driven.

Some fifteen minutes later, he crawled out of bed like an exhausted swimmer leaving the surf, and dropped down into a large armchair near the window. She went into the bathroom, then came back and sat in his lap (p. 101).

The simplest distinction between the comic and the tragic is that those misfortunes are tragic in which we are personally involved and those which we can observe unscathed from a distance are comic. In this scene, the reader is standing back and observing Lonelyhearts. For these few minutes, West is not interested in the Christ-complex or in the sufferings of humanity. We do not identify with either Lonelyhearts or Mrs. Doyle, and thus the scene is pure comedy. More often in the novel, West wields the narration in such a fashion that we understand Lonelyhearts and the correspondents and yet do not enter into them, thus creating a mixture of pathos and comedy.

Mrs. Doyle now submits her once-demon lover to a long-winded tale of woe. She married her husband because the neighborhood rake by whom she was pregnant refused to marry her. It does not occur to her that this was gallantry beyond the call of duty on Doyle's part. Her problem now is that she made the mistake of telling her daughter that Doyle was not really her father. The impotent, who had convinced himself that he was the real father, attacked his wife--to his own sorrow. Mrs. Doyle does not see that this family crisis is entirely of her own making; she prefers to pity the wasting of her youth.

Lonelyhearts responds to her pauses and nudges with punctuations of trite sympathy. But when he makes the mistake of perfunctorily praising her beauty, she drags him to his reward.

Comedy predominates in this scene, comedy springing from the characterization of the awful Mrs. Doyle and from the extravagant language of West's narration. But the chapter is not a mere tour de force. It is pivotal in the movement of the novel. Because of the comedy, the reader scarcely notices that Lonelyhearts has made the transition from sadistic pursuer to victim. Mrs. Doyle, the personification of humanity and the first of the correspondents with whom he has had personal contact, is just too much for him. He already has intimations of mortality: "The life out of which she spoke was even heavier than her body. It was as if a gigantic, living Miss Lonelyhearts letter in the shape of a paper weight had been placed on his brain" (p. 102).

The revulsion which Fay Doyle inspires in Miss Lonelyhearts is in itself no proof of his homosexuality, for she would be enough to take the edge off the most voracious heterosexual hunger. It is, however, perfectly consistent with his previous failures to strike a satisfactory relationship with a woman. Furthermore, the gravity of the trauma is hyperbolic. The eighth chapter, "Miss Lonelyhearts in the dismal swamp," finds

Lonelyhearts sick in bed for the third straight day following collapse under the weight of Fay's affection.

His feverish imagination places him in a pawnshop, among "the paraphernalia of suffering" (p. 104). He reflects on that tension between mind and matter that is explored in Balso Snell:

Man has a tropism for order. Keys in one pocket, change in another. Mandolins are tuned G D A E. The physical world has a tropism for disorder, entropy. Man against Nature . . . the battle of the centuries. Keys yearn to mix with change. Mandolins strive to get out of tune. Every order has within it the germ of destruction. All order is doomed, yet the battle is worth while (p. 104).

He falls asleep waging the battle to put the pawnshop in order. Later, he is awakened by Betty, bearing hot soup and a bedside efficiency. He apologizes for their last meeting, and she attributes his nervous condition to the job and to city life in general. Lonelyhearts argues that the correspondents have branded their plight indelibly on his brain:

"Perhaps I can make you understand. Let's start from the beginning. A man is hired to give advice to the readers of a newspaper. The job is a circulation and the whole staff considers it a joke. He welcomes the job, for it might lead to a gossip column, and anyway he's tired of being a leg man. He too considers the job a joke, but after several months at it, the joke begins to escape him. He sees that the majority of the letters are profoundly humble pleas for moral and spiritual advice, that they are inarticulate expressions of genuine suffering. He also discovers that his correspondents take him seriously. For the first time in his life, he is

forced to examine the values by which he lives. This examination shows him that he is the victim of the joke and not its perpetrator (p. 106).

His eloquence, however, passes right over Betty's head. She insists that he should return to nature and that if he did, "he would find that all his troubles were city troubles" (p. 106).

At this point Shrike enters and Betty exits. Shrike launches into his masterpiece, a four page monologue on the impossibility of finding an escape from the bitter facts of life. Systematically he debunks the pastoral escape, the South Seas hideaway, hedonism, art, suicide. The final alternative is Christ, "the Miss Lonelyhearts of Miss Lonelyhearts": "I read your column and like it very much. There you once wrote: 'When the salt has lost its savour, who shall savour it?' Is the answer: 'None but the Saviour?'" (p. 110).

Shrike's masterpiece is also West's. I have mentioned the prevalence of these extended, heightened speeches in Balso as well as in Lonelyhearts. The technique was very possibly learned from Dostoevski, whose characters are prone to unburden themselves at great length. But the comic use of such orations is original with West.

This particular monologue is, according to Marc L. Ratner, adapted from Baudelaire's prose-poem, "Anywhere

Out of This World."²³ The similarities in structure and text are such that the poem must certainly have been working on West's imagination. In the poem a man compares the plight of his soul to that of hospital patients who are always longing to change their beds. He proposes to his soul that life might be pleasanter in sunny Lisbon, quaint Rotterdam, tropical Batavia, or the remote outposts of Torneo, the Baltic, or the North Pole. To each suggestion the soul remains silent (as does Lonelyhearts), until finally it explodes, "N'importe ou hors du monde." The process of elimination is certainly parallel to Shrike's, and, ironically, Lonelyhearts does eventually find his only escape out of this world.

Shrike arrives on scene without introduction and the chapter ends with the final word of his monologue. The bareness of the staging is classical. Fortunately, the interest of the speech itself is sufficient to obviate narrative paraphernalia. Shrike has greatly accelerated the action of the novel; Lonelyhearts will not be able to run from his divine mission much longer.

He is, however, granted a reprieve. In "Miss Lonelyhearts in the country" he is persuaded to try a few days on Betty's ancestral farm in Connecticut as a recuperative measure for body and soul. Thus begins an

23. Marc L. Ratner, "'Anywhere Out of This World': Baudelaire and Nathanael West," American Literature, XXXI (1960), 456-463.

idyl, the only happy chapter in the book. Eating huge breakfasts, swimming, sipping gin, watching heron hunt fawns and deer feed on lily pads, he is able to forget about the letters. The one unpleasant moment occurs when he is forced back into society long enough to buy gas. He remarks to the attendant about seeing the deer: "The man said that there was still plenty of deer at the pond because no yids ever went there. He said it wasn't the hunters who drove out the deer, but the yids" (p. 114). Unlike many of West's references to Jews, this is not at their expense. The fulfillment of the pastoral occurs when Betty willingly surrenders up her virginity to him, while a thrush warbles and the warmth of the sun is unbothered by any breeze.

West evokes this stylized rural serenity with the same skill with which he conjures the dessication of the city. Nevertheless, neither Lonelyhearts nor the reader is completely taken in by the unreality of this Eden. Connecticut is a nice place to visit, but only Betty would want to live there. Driving back into the city, Lonelyhearts comes back to his senses:

When they reached the Bronx slums, Miss Lonelyhearts knew that Betty had failed to cure him and that he had been right when he had said that he could never forget the letters. He felt better, knowing this, because he had begun to think himself a faker and a fool (p. 115).

Actually, the few days away from it all have an effect on Lonelyhearts that was not calculated by Betty. He is purged of the constant irritation and streak of sadism that once led him to torment Betty and the clean old man. Now, as he observes the crowds of broken people, he is "overwhelmed by the desire to help them, and because this desire was sincere, happy despite the feeling of guilt which accompanied it" (p. 115). He is taking a new direction, no longer seeking escapes from Christ, but embracing his mission, involving himself in humanity.

What is his mission? Why has he been singled out? In what way is he fit to lead others?:

Prodded by his conscience, he began to generalize. Men have always fought their misery with dreams. Although dreams were once powerful, they have been made puerile by the movies, radio and newspapers. Among many betrayals, this one is the worst.

The thing that made his share in it particularly bad was that he was capable of dreaming the Christ dream. He felt that he had failed at it, not so much because of Shrike's jokes or his own self-doubt, but because of his lack of humility (p. 115).

Lonelyhearts' gift to the multitudes is simply a greater illusion than those to which they are accustomed; his sustaining power will be his humility. Whether this is the heroic virtue of a saint or merely the masochistic component of his personality asserting itself is yet to be seen.

The next day he tries to devote his column to the Christ-dream, but his phrases are lifeless. Inevitably, the climatic conditions outside his window mirror his ennui:

A slow spring rain was changing the dusty tar roofs below him to shiny patent leather. The water made everything slippery and he could find no support for either his eyes or his feelings (p. 116).

To re-affirm his charity, he reads through another letter. It is a long letter in the demotic style of the letters in the first chapter. But it far outstrips all the previous letters in the abundance of its sufferings.

The correspondent married a soldier during the war out of patriotic motives. She worked while he was away and, because he could not hold down a job when he returned, she continued until her second child was born. Then to supplement their income, she took in one of his buddies as a boarder. Soon her husband deserted her, inaugurating a nightmare sequence of arrests for non-support, beatings whenever he got out of jail, threats upon her life, and sadistic schemes of maniacal ingenuity. One of his proudest inventions was the time he hid under her bed all day long and scared her so severely that night that she went into hysteria and paralysis. At the close of the letter, the husband has run away again, the boarder is testing her chastity, and the woman is broke. She demands of Lonelyhearts, "Every woman is intitled to a home isnt she?" (p. 121).

The remarkable thing about the letter is that West has succeeded in making it not only an unforgettable parable of human evil and inhuman suffering, but a rare

piece of comedy as well. The woman's tale of woe demands the reader's pity. But illiteracy is inevitably both comic and pathetic. In this letter, certain errors are doubly comic because they express truths that the woman did not intend. For example, she refers to her husband's war service as "this patriotic stunt" rather than "stint" (p. 117). The extravagance of her husband's schemes forces one to laugh in spite of himself; West practices the sinister humor of the Jew of Malta, the Marquis de Sade, and Jason Compson. Finally, having signed the letter "Broad Shoulders," the woman scrupulously appends the following postscript: "Dear Miss Lonelyhearts dont think I am broad shouldered but that is the way I feel about life and me I mean" (p. 121). Again, West adopts the dramatic device of the strong curtain, ending the chapter with the postscript to the letter.

Lonelyhearts no longer identifies with the hunter but with the hunted. The next chapter, "Miss Lonelyhearts and the cripple," confirms Lonelyhearts' change of heart and initiates the movement towards catastrophe.

Miss Lonelyhearts has been avoiding Betty because he feels ridiculous when exposed to her wholesomeness. He is shielding his new-found humility from self-laughter. When he accepts Goldsmith's invitation to a drink at Delehanty's, his humility is so abject that Goldsmith is frightened. He tries to warn Shrike about Lonelyhearts'

condition. This is the first indication West has given that Lonelyhearts has progressed beyond psychological normality to the point where he is a misfit even among such strange types as Shrike and Goldsmith.

Shrike tries to harass Lonelyhearts, but "the familiar jokes no longer had any effect on Miss Lonelyhearts. He smiled at Shrike as the saints are supposed to have smiled at those about to martyr them" (p. 122). Having exhausted the escapes that Baudelaire and Shrike proposed and disparaged, Lonelyhearts is withdrawing psychologically from this world at the very time that he has committed himself to an immersion in humanity. The image of salt recurs with a slightly different meaning as Shrike facetiously chides Goldsmith's sarcasm:

"Goldsmith, you are the nasty product of this unbelieving age. You cannot believe, you can only laugh. You take everything with a bag of salt and forget that salt is the enemy of fire as well as of ice. Be warned, the salt you use is not Attic salt, it is coarse butcher's salt. It doesn't preserve; it kills" (p. 122).

At this point, the bartender introduces Peter Doyle, the crippled husband of Fay Doyle. In the light of the close relationship that develops between Doyle and Lonelyhearts, it seems likely that West had Whitman's very close friend in mind when he chose the cripple's name. But Doyle and Shrike, humanity and inhumanity, understandably do not hit it off. Shrike and Goldsmith leave. Miss Lonelyhearts, on the other hand, bathes the cripple in a

healing smile. He accepts an invitation to dine with the Doyles and, significantly, Doyle shakes his hand for the third time. He and Doyle face each other in wordless communication that excites them both. Describing Doyle's face, West finds the perfect contemporary symbol of Everyman: "He looked like one of those composite photographs used by screen magazines in guessing contests" (p. 124). When Doyle finally opens the valve of his frustrations and humiliations, Lonelyhearts is his confessor: "Like a priest, Miss Lonelyhearts turned his face slightly away" (p. 124). Like those of Homer Simpson, Doyle's hands carry on an automatic conversation of their own:

He watched the play of the cripple's hands. At first they conveyed nothing but excitement, then gradually they became pictorial. They lagged behind to illustrate a matter with which he was already finished, or ran ahead to illustrate something he had not yet begun to talk about (p. 124).

The hands produce a letter which Doyle has written to Miss Lonelyhearts. It is comic in parts, but in this case the humor only serves to make the pathos more biting. Doyle's life is one of morning-to-night suffering, but unlike more deluded people, he does not blame the economic system or his boss or his wife or even his physical condition. He could bear all these crosses, if someone could only give him a good reason for living: "It aint the job that I am complaining about but what I want to no is what is the

whole stinking business for" (p. 125). The pitch of excitement to which the letter has brought both of them sets the stage for a crucial accident:

While Miss Lonelyhearts was puzzling out the crabbed writing, Doyle's hand accidentally touched his under the table. He jerked away, but then drove his hand back and forced it to clasp the cripple's. After finishing the letter, he did not let go, but pressed it firmly with all the love he could manage. At first the cripple covered his embarrassment by disguising the meaning of the clasp with a handshake, but he soon gave in to it and they sat silently, hand in hand (p. 126).

This may be interpreted in more ways than one. It is a religious act--the symbolic kiss of the leper. As such it confirms Lonelyhearts' missionary role. It is also in contrast to his sadistic treatment of the clean old man. Two definitions by Wilhelm Stekel are noteworthy here: "For the sadist, it is a matter of overcoming the resistance of another; for the masochist, the conquering of his own resistances."²⁴ In this light, the complete turnabout that Lonelyhearts has taken is apparent. In twisting the old man's arm, he was sadistically trying to overcome the man's resistance; in touching Doyle, he has masochistically overcome his own repulsion. There is a further level of interpretation. The handclasp is, West tells us, charged with love. It is permissible to accept this love, in part at least, as humanistic. But in the light of the past sex

24. Wilhelm Stekel, Sadism and Masochism: The Psychology of Hatred and Cruelty, I, trans. by Louise Brink (New York, 1939), 50.

lives of both Doyle and Lonelyhearts, the gesture may be regarded as a homosexual compact as well.

Actually, as contradictory as these interpretations may seem, they coincide and are meant to demonstrate the complexity of motives which are usually oversimplified. Lonelyhearts is drunk with the dream of religion and with the release of his homosexuality. He loves humanity and he loves Peter Doyle. This is indeed his finest hour--the only occasion in his lifetime when he is at one with himself and effective in succoring another person.

The thirteenth chapter, "Miss Lonelyhearts pays a visit," is one of the most abrasive in character interrelationships. Doyle and Lonelyhearts leave the speakeasy for Doyle's apartment. In the cab, they both invoke Christ, Doyle with curses and Lonelyhearts with joy. West emphasizes that Lonelyhearts' humility (selected for emphasis for obvious reasons) has now become "a triumphant thing" (p. 126). As they enter Doyle's apartment, however, Lonelyhearts' bliss receives a jolt in the form of a goose from Mrs. Doyle.

Mrs. Doyle has obviously angled for a repeat performance with Lonelyhearts. To this end, she plies him with red wine and highballs. During the meal, she presses her thigh under his, but he is inviolable. His interest is not in women; rather, "he was trying desperately to feel

again what he had felt while holding hands with the cripple in the speakeasy" (p. 127).

When Mrs. Doyle openly flirts with Lonelyhearts, her husband is infuriated: "Ain't I the pimp, to bring home a guy for my wife" (p. 128). When he glances apologetically at Lonelyhearts, it is difficult to decide whether he is feeling more protective towards his wife or towards his new friend. This is soon clarified. His wife strikes at him with a rolled newspaper, which he catches in his mouth. He goes into a dog act, surely humility with a vengeance. At the climax of his exhibition, he tears open Lonelyhearts' fly and goes into hysterics.

Since entering the apartment, Lonelyhearts has been silently formulating a "message," his gospel. Another outburst from his hosts provokes a premature statement: "'Please don't fight,' he pleaded. 'He loves you, Mrs. Doyle; that's why he acts like that. Be kind to him'" (p. 128). The teaching has no spiritual effect, but it does drive Mrs. Doyle from the room. This gives Lonelyhearts and Doyle their first chance to re-construct the kinetic tableau of the speakeasy:

Miss Lonelyhearts went over to the cripple and smiled at him with the same smile he had used in the speakeasy. The cripple returned the smile and stuck out his hand. Miss Lonelyhearts clasped it, and they stood this way, smiling and holding hands, until Mrs. Doyle reentered the room (p. 129).

The woman wastes no time in dispelling their enchantment: "What a sweet pair of fairies you guys are," she said" (p. 129). West has certainly not disposed the reader to view the relationship with Mrs. Doyle's contempt, but she has, in her blunt, vulgar fashion, confronted them with their homosexuality.

Lonelyhearts realizes that it is now or never for his message. He makes an appeal to human love:

"You have a big strong body, Mrs. Doyle. Holding your husband in your arms, you can warm him and give him life. You can take the chill out of his bones. He drags his days out in areaways and cellars, carrying a heavy load of weariness and pain. You can substitute a dream of yourself for this load. A buoyant dream that will be like a dynamo in him. You can do this by letting him conquer you in your bed. He will repay you by flowering and becoming ardent over you. . . ." (p. 129).

Lonelyhearts, of course, knows from experience that this is not true. When the embarrassing words fall flat on their faces, he turns to his ace-in-the-hole, the Christ-Dream:

"Christ is love," he screamed at them. It was a stage scream, but he kept on. "Christ is the black fruit that hangs on the crosstree. Man was lost by eating of the forbidden fruit. He shall be saved by eating of the bidden fruit. The black Christ-fruit, the love fruit . . ." (p. 129).

His rhetoric is a parody of itself and impotent, although Doyle kisses his wife out of loyalty to Lonelyhearts. West describes the defeated Lonelyhearts as "an empty bottle, shiny and sterile" (p. 129).

Mrs. Doyle sends her husband after gin and nuzzles the guest. Returning to the previous image, West now describes him as "an empty bottle that is being slowly filled with warm, dirty water" (p. 130). In utter disgust, he spills her off his lap and pummels her until she lets him go. Then he flees the apartment.

With a deft touch of comedy, West retires Lonelyhearts to bed for another three days after this second confrontation with Mrs. Doyle. The period becomes the dark night of Lonelyhearts' soul, his Gethsemane, during which he achieves a perfect calm. The solidification of his personality is expressed by two images from his dreams:

Later a train rolled into a station where he was a reclining statue holding a stopped clock, a coach rumbled into the yard of an inn where he was sitting over a guitar, cap in hand, shedding the rain with his hump (p. 131).

Time has stopped for Lonelyhearts. He has withdrawn from the world of change into an eternity of his own creation.

When he is roused from bed by Shrike and a crowd of friends, he answers the door naked. Shrike assaults him in defense of his wife's modesty:

Miss Lonelyhearts stood quietly in the center of the room. Shrike dashed against him, but fell back, as a wave that dashes against an ancient rock, smooth with experience, falls back. There was no second wave (p. 132).

Lonelyhearts is henceforward The Rock, not so much Peter or the Church, however, as he is a mental rock, sufficient

unto himself, but no longer flexible. Shrike tries to enlist him for a party game, "Everyman his own Miss Lonelyhearts," but he becomes shrill when his rhetoric fails to daunt his old victim: "He was a gull trying to lay an egg in the smooth flank of a rock, a screaming, clumsy gull" (p. 132).

Lonelyhearts joins them as a test of his imperturbability. The rock is something within him and yet different from him: "The rock remained calm and solid. Although Miss Lonelyhearts did not doubt that it could withstand any test, he was willing to have it tried" (p. 132). In the taxi, the rock remains unmoved in spite of Mary Shrike's drunken wriggling on his lap. The great test occurs when he enters Shrike's apartment:

The party was in Shrike's apartment. A roar went up when Miss Lonelyhearts entered and the crowd surged forward. He stood firm and they slipped back in a futile curl. He smiled. He had turned more than a dozen drunkards. He had turned them without effort or thought (p. 133).

Shrike begins to read Lonelyhearts' letters. The partiers will diagnose each letter and then Lonelyhearts will diagnose the partiers. He will provide them each with a raison d'etre. Actually, this is not too much to ask of a Christ figure. Nevertheless, whatever sympathy the reader may have had for Shrike's realism is dispelled by his insensitivity to two particularly pathetic letters:

"Here's one from an old woman whose son died last week. She is seventy years old and sells pencils for a living. She has no stockings and wears heavy boots on her torn and bleeding feet. She has rheum in her eyes. Have you room in your heart for her?"

"This one is a jim-dandy. A young boy wants a violin. It looks simple; all you have to do is get the kid one. But then you discover that he has dictated the letter to his little sister. He is paralyzed and can't even feed himself. He has a toy violin and hugs it to his chest, imitating the sound of playing with his mouth. How pathetic! However, one can learn much from this parable. Label the boy Labor, the violin Capital, and so on . . ." (pp. 133-134).

Even these outrages are unable to fluster Lonelyhearts:

Miss Lonelyhearts stood it with the utmost serenity; he was not even interested. What goes on in the sea is of no interest to the rock (p. 134).

Lonelyhearts follows Betty from the party. In his absence Shrike reads a letter from Doyle, threatening Lonelyhearts' life for attempting to rape his wife.

In the next-to-last chapter, "Miss Lonelyhearts and the party dress," Lonelyhearts tests himself against Betty's wholesomeness, having survived the test of Shrike's cynicism. He is fond of Betty in her little girl's dress, but he makes a distinction:

Even the rock was touched by this realization. No; it was not the rock that was touched. The rock was still perfect. It was his mind that was touched, the instrument with which he knew the rock (p. 136).

There must be a pun in the phrase, "It was his mind that was touched." But to Lonelyhearts, his mind seems

unnaturally clear: "The things that had muddied it had precipitated into the rock" (p. 136).

Over strawberry sodas the two of them regain the innocence of the Connecticut pastoral. This is shattered when Betty admits, in tears, that she is pregnant. Lonelyhearts persuades her to marry him and have the baby. In turn he will quit the newspaper and take a job with an advertising agency.

This interlude is the lull before the storm. The last chapter, "Miss Lonelyhearts has a religious experience," proves that Lonelyhearts, or at least the rock within him, never had any intention of deserting his correspondents. He awakes with fever, and in his fever he turns to Christ:

He fastened his eyes on the Christ that hung on the wall opposite his bed. As he stared at it, it became a bright fly, spinning with quick grace on a background of black velvet sprinkled with tiny nerve stars.

Everything else in the room was dead--chairs, table, pencils, clothes, books. He thought of this black world of things as a fish. And he was right, for it suddenly rose to the bright bait on the wall. It rose with a splash of music and he saw its shining silver belly.

Christ is life and light (p. 139).

At last he has allowed the Christ-Dream to bring the waste land to life. But at a great cost--his sanity. For in gaining Christ, he has lost himself:

He was conscious of two rhythms that were slowly becoming one. When they became one, his identification with God was complete. His

heart was the one heart, the heart of God. And his brain was likewise God's (p. 139).

As hard as it seems to believe, his whole discussion of marriage with Betty seems to have been an elaborate pretense, an absurdity, the fabrication of a mind that has become so single of purpose that nothing else is of the slightest importance:

He immediately began to plan a new life and his future conduct as Miss Lonelyhearts. He submitted drafts of his column to God and God approved them. God approved his every thought (p. 139).

The doorbell rings and Lonelyhearts goes to the head of the stairs. Doyle is climbing the stairs, ascending towards heaven:

God had sent him so that Miss Lonelyhearts could perform a miracle and be certain of his conversion. It was a sign. He would embrace the cripple and the cripple would be made whole again, even as he, a spiritual cripple, had been made whole (p. 140).

Doyle shouts at him and he mistakes the warning for a cry for help from his correspondents: "He was running to succor them with love" (p. 140). Betty enters while they are struggling on the stair. The cripple tries to get rid of his hidden weapon and accidentally shoots Lonelyhearts. They roll together down the stairs.

Stanley Edgar Hyman has called this death scene "a homosexual tableau--the men locked in embrace while the

woman stands helplessly by."²⁵ It is that, I think, and it is also the consummation of Lonelyhearts' withdrawal from reality and the puncturing of the Christ-Dream with an all-too-tangible bullet. Miss Lonelyhearts, in his messianic obsession, has not brought comfort to the afflicted. He has, rather, left Betty to choose between unwed motherhood and an abortion and he has doomed Doyle to remorse of conscience and a probable sentence for manslaughter, perhaps murder. Furthermore, it is unlikely that Lonelyhearts' martyrdom will have the efficacy of Lincoln's or Christ's. Nor can we grant him the dignity of a tragic victory in defeat. He has uttered no scripture; he has achieved no real self-knowledge; his gestures have been slapstick.

In spite of the differences between the two novels, the implications of Miss Lonelyhearts are as nihilistic as those of Balso Snell. Each of the characters represents an unsatisfactory view of life. Betty's stubborn refusal to include the unsavory in her smugly hygienic world is more repulsive than Lonelyhearts' harlequinade. Hers is the typical optimism of twentieth-century America, cosily materialistic and adamantly anti-intellectual. Mrs. Doyle's bed is the refuge of the masses, for whom there is little other diversion. Shrike is the dissenter, the

25. Hyman, p. 22.

critic of illusions. Unfortunately, his cynicism is unable to solve his own sexual enigmas or to shield him from himself. The virile joshing of the boys in Delehanty's is transparent, and they themselves have seen through Art. Doyle, for all his sympathetic qualities, remains little more than canine. Each of these characters, then, has a one-dimensional view of life, and all of them are guilty of existential "bad faith," or the loss of flexible response to life, the forfeiture of freedom.

Of course, the major viewpoint in the novel is Miss Lonelyhearts', and he is more complicated than the other cases. It is made quite clear that his Christ-complex is not a supernatural phenomenon, but a psychological abnormality, sterile and self-destructive, with its roots deep in Lonelyhearts' past. It is not necessary to specify his condition with clinical accuracy, but certain aspects may be described. Lonelyhearts is obviously to some degree homosexual. He is sadomasochistic, sadistic in the first part of the book, masochistic in the second. At some time before the start of the book his sexuality has become tangled with Christ-mysticism. His unhappy exposure to the raw suffering of the correspondents makes the working out of his sexuality through religion likely.

The interest of the book, however, is not primarily the case history of Lonelyhearts. The function of his abnormal sexuality is to undermine the religious response

to life. In him, Religion, like art and sex and the rest, is an illusion, an excretion of man's lower nature. And yet Christ is the Big Dream. Doyle's bullet, therefore, punctures not only Lonelyhearts' own illusion of salvation, not only the universalized balloons of religion and humanitarianism, but hope itself. If the biggest dream cannot be translated into actuality, then there is no use even trying the little dreams.

Why then is the mood of the book not the overwhelming disgust of Balso Snell? First of all, the writing is much finer, and one cannot help being encouraged by original perceptions no matter what their import. Secondly, the humor, destructive as it is, can be enjoyed. The reader is not submitted to bad jokes and obscure puns and parodies. The mature writer of Lonelyhearts enjoys creating a comic effect, whereas the young author of Balso Snell too often had his own laugh at the disappointment of the reader. Thirdly, and most often noted, there is a prominent vein of compassion in Lonelyhearts. It is the compassion which Lonelyhearts sought and never found, but which West did. The characters in the novel suffer a variety of troubles which enlist our sympathies; the universal bond, however, is sexual incompleteness. Doyle is impotent, his wife insatiable. Mary Shrike is frigid, her husband anything but romantic. Miss Farkis is masculine; the clean old man is feminine. Angelic Betty loves the

cloven-hoofed Lonelyhearts. The boys in Delehanty's resort to dreams of rape. None of the correspondents is verbose in the praise of romance. Lonelyhearts' own love life deserves the attention of Freud and Jung in tandem. Thus, the reader sympathizes with the characters and laughs at them and is depressed by man's fate, all at the same time. Compassion, like aspirin, cures nothing. West's compassion is not meant to delude the reader. It is, rather, an ingredient in his realistic comprehension of the facts of life.

This then is what the book means. If one neglects either the pathos or the comedy or the pessimism of the novel, he is apt not to like the book. If one neglects the formal perfection of the book, he is missing its unique virtue.

The movement of the novel is like that of Oedipus or Hamlet in that the situation which will lead to the downfall of the protagonist exists before the first scene of the work. Lonelyhearts' Christ-complex is of long duration and it has been worn red by the letters for weeks before the book begins. The first six scenes serve to establish the struggle between the sadistic and masochistic poles of Lonelyhearts' personality, to give us a glimpse of the history of his condition, and to present its alternatives in the persons of the other characters. When Lonelyhearts receives Mrs. Doyle's

letter, the reader does not foresee the train of events that will lead to the hero's death, but he does sense Lonelyhearts' personal involvement in the chaotic lives of his correspondents, the danger of this involvement, and the turning point in Lonelyhearts' inner life which is caused by his traumatic mating with Mrs. Doyle. The fury of that chapter is relieved by the sickroom theorizing of Betty and Shrike in the next. There follows the one "happy" scene of the book, the Connecticut recuperation. As soon as Lonelyhearts returns, he receives the worst letter yet. In rapid succession, he meets Doyle, attends the supper that seals his doom, goes mad, pantomimes normality, and rushes to his religious experience. The catastrophe is swift, and the denouement consists of one sentence in which the grappling men and the movement of the novel roll to a halt on the stairway. West, then, varies the tempo of the book and alternates scenes of action, reflection, and dialogue. He steers the book through exposition, conflict, and catastrophe, giving an occasional respite from the progress which only enhances the feeling of inevitability.

The chapters of Miss Lonelyhearts have been compared to a prologue plus fourteen stations of the cross.²⁵ While a station by station comparison would

25. Coates, p. 59.

probably prove unfruitful, there are similarities. Each episode in Lonelyhearts is a tableau in the sense that each incident in the Passion can be symbolized by a single picture which implies much more. Thus, we can picture Lonelyhearts reading the letters, cigarette in mouth, or Lonelyhearts killing the lamb or Lonelyhearts tearing at Mary Shrike's clothes or Lonelyhearts holding Doyle's hand or wrestling with him on the stairs. In both the novel and the devotion, there are the preliminaries, such as the Agony in the Garden and the Agony among the Letters, followed by the inevitable ascent of Calvary. There are moments of intensified suffering and interludes, such as the drying of the face by Veronica and the Connecticut pastoral. There is, however, no resurrection for Lonelyhearts.

West himself has offered another analogy to the novel's technique. He has suggested that the book might have been subtitled: "A novel in the form of a comic strip":

The chapters to be squares in which many things happen through one action. The speeches contained in the conventional balloons. I abandoned this idea, but retained some of the comic strip technique: Each chapter instead of going forward in time, also goes backward, forward, up and down in space like a picture. Violent images are used to illustrate commonplace events. Violent acts are left almost bald.²⁶

26. Nathanael West, "Some Notes on Miss L." p. 1.

The use of the episodes provides that there be no lowpoints of interest, no filling in of time. At the same time, the transitions are so handled that the reader is never in need of more information than that provided by the highly scenic narration.

If the titles of the chapters recall the stations of the cross or the repetitions of a litany, they also recall the chapters of Pilgrim's Progress. This similarity supports James Light's thesis that the novel is in the form of a quest. However, the repetition of the name "Miss Lonelyhearts" in each title seems more significant to me. The fact that the protagonist is identified only by a female name seems to reinforce the other hints of latent homosexuality.

All the secondary characters are flat, but they are neither drawn without imagination nor are they superfluous. They are flat in the sense that many of Dickens' characters are flat--they present only one face, but often an unforgettable face, to the reader. Lonelyhearts himself has, at the beginning of the book, more than one face. But West has assembled the faces cubistically. If, in fact, he had gone through with the novel in comic strip form, the finished product might have been a composite of secondary characters out of "Dick Tracy," surrounding a protagonist out of Picasso. This is a highly appropriate mode of description for a character with a multiple

personality. As the action progresses, Lonelyhearts' personality solidifies to The Rock. Then, he too is a flat character, a caricature, and it is a sign of the failure of his mission that he has, like all the other characters in the book, forfeited his existential freedom.

West was aware of the unusual tenor of his imagery: "Violent images are used to illustrate commonplace events. Violent acts are left almost bald."²⁷ In another place he offered a rationale for violence:

What is melodramatic in European writing is not necessarily so in American writing. For a European writer to make violence real, he has to do a good deal of careful psychology and sociology. He often needs three hundred pages to motivate one little murder. But not so the American writer. His audience has been prepared and is neither surprised nor shocked if he omits artistic excuses for familiar events. When he reads a little book with eight or ten murders in it, he does not necessarily condemn the book as melodramatic. He is far from the ancient Greeks, and still further from those people who need the naturalism of Zola or the realism of Flaubert to make writing seem "artistically [sic] true."²⁸

James Light has defined the surrealist image in West as "a process by which a distorted, unique perception, usually based on an incongruous conceit, becomes a symbol for an affective complex."²⁹ West's settings in particular are external expressions of states of mind. They are few

27. West, "Some Notes on Miss L." p. 1.

28. West, "Some Notes on Violence," Contact, I (October, 1932), 133.

29. Light, p. 95.

and recurrent: the waste land of the park, the dream land of Lonelyhearts' room, the underground of Delehanty's, or Shrike's lair, the city office. Certain types of imagery occur: phallic, saline, petrifactive, dessicative.

West's secret is particularization. Every scene is milked for its significant details. Shrike's monologues and the description of Lonelyhearts are obvious examples of this method. Each word of the narration serves two purposes: to help create the illusion of a real world and to contribute to the symbolic meaning of the novel. It is through this scrupulous particularization that the unusual is made plausible and that the new perception is made vivid. A careful reader of Miss Lonelyhearts is not surprised to learn that it evolved through six drafts.

Miss Lonelyhearts is by no means an imitative book. Nevertheless, a number of influences can be discerned. James Light has found the most important to be Dostoevsky, French symbolism, and surrealism.³⁰ Not only are the scenes of mental cruelty, the introspection of the hero, and the general theme of man's inhumanity to man similar to the Russian's works, but there is also the presence of that staple of Dostoevskian fiction--the double. An introduction to one edition of The Double calls attention to the prevalence of this psychological allegory:

30. Ibid., pp. 89-101.

Mr. Golyadkin is the prototype of a series of tragic characters in Dostoevsky's later works, who are out of harmony with their milieu, and whose mental plight is aggravated by their own rebellious, self-assertive urges. Raskolnikov in Crime and Punishment, Stavrogin in The Possessed, and Ivan Karamazov in The Brothers Karamazov, are some of the vastly more complicated developments of this character, who wander in philosophic and spiritual labyrinths beyond the range of his mind. And each of these is confronted by a modified form of double, an embodiment of some hateful aspect of himself to mock or torment him--Raskolnikov by Svidrigaylov, Stavrogin by Verkhovensky, and Ivan Karamazov by Smerdyakov.³¹

Lonelyhearts' double is, of course, Shrike. Shrike mirrors his sadistic component and expresses that realistic criticism of illusions which Lonelyhearts seldom allows himself to face. What is more, I have pointed out that when Shrike once lets down his guard and accepts the role of victim, usually Lonelyhearts' role, Lonelyhearts immediately takes up Shrike's role and laughs in his boss's face. One further similarity to Dostoevsky has been remarked by Arthur Cohen, who sees Lonelyhearts, along with Sonia, Alyosha, and Prince Myshkin, as belonging to the archetype of the Holy Fool.³² His interpretation, however, varies somewhat from the one I have presented. I feel that West has clearly rejected the Christian mysticism which was the culmination of Dostoevsky's quest.

31. George Bird, "Translator's Note," in F. M. Dostoevsky, The Double: A Poem of St. Petersburg (London, 1957), pp. 6-7.

32. Arthur Cohen, "Nathanael West's Holy Fool," Commonweal, LXIV (June 15, 1956), 276-278.

I have, earlier in the chapter, mentioned similarities to both Baudelaire and surrealism. It seems helpful to keep Baudelaire in mind when trying to grasp the peculiar spiritual aridity of characters such as Lonelyhearts and Tod Hackett. In both cases, Baudelaire's poetic descriptions of ennui serve as a closer approximation than any of the concepts of depth psychology or even of existentialism. The influence of surrealism was largely upon West's imagery and it was, as Light pointed out, more the influence of surrealist painting than of surrealist writing. The guiding belief of the surrealists--that there was a hidden reality that could only be reached by destruction of the barriers of quotidian consciousness--is shared by West. This Absolute is, however, presumably a source of meaning and value for the surrealists; for West it is an absolute nothingness. Francis Picabia described the surrealist Absolute by means of the following image:

Beaucoup de personnes cherchent a se
 représenter l'infini. Imaginez deux glaces ayant
 les memes formes et dimensions, posees en face
 l'une de l'autre: l'infini est le reflet
 qu'elles se renvoient.³³

If we can think of this image in terms of negation, it will provide some comprehension of West's negative infinity. Miss Balakian describes the surrealist journey or quest in terms that will also be familiar to readers of West:

33. Quoted in Anna Balakian, Literary Origins of Surrealism: A New Mysticism in French Poetry, (New York, 1947) p. 20.

Whereas a voyage was considered by the Romanticists a means of enlarging space and populating time, a means of releasing physical energy and increasing exterior stimuli, the voyage that will now be evolved will seek, on the contrary, to limit and concentrate time to the minimum, divest it as much as possible of physical movement, free the explorer little by little from exterior stimuli and horizons, and surround the traveller with such landscapes as will reveal a changed relationship in regard to nature. This voyage was to represent the poet's orientation toward his inner absolute image of exterior entities.³⁴

Existentialism was not an organized school of philosophy at the time West wrote his novels. Sartre's ideas, nevertheless, are expressions of attitudes that have been gaining increased currency ever since Nietzsche informed the world that God was dead. It is precisely man's freedom from all a priori meanings and values that has led Lonely-hearts into the waste land where he can discern no omens in the sky. There is a difference though. For Sartre, freedom is the basis of man's dignity as well as the source of his woes; for West, it is simply a hopeless situation.

West called attention to one source of the Lonely-hearts "myth":

With this last idea in mind, Miss Lonely-hearts became the portrait of a priest of our time who has a religious experience. His case is classical and is built on all the cases in James' Varieties of Religious Experience and Starbuck's Psychology of Religion. The psychology is theirs not mine. The imagery /sic/ is mine. Chapt. I--maladjustment. Chapt. III--the need for

34. Balakian, p. 100.

CHAPTER IV

THE DISMANTLING OF THE AMERICAN MYTH

A Cool Million or, The Dismantling of Lemuel Pitkin

has never received the critical acceptance that has finally been accorded Miss Lonelyhearts and The Day of the Locust. It would, however, be a mistake to assume that its reviewers were universally disappointed in the new novel by the author of Miss Lonelyhearts. John Chamberlain, in the New York Times, praised the political insight of the author:

Mr. West has put together two sets of myth to make his fable. First, there is the American myth of 'from canal boy to President.' Then there is the German Horst Wessel myth, in which a pimp is chosen by circumstance to become the hero of the song of the Nazi troopers. With one eye on the Silver Shirts, the White Legion, General Art Smith, and other embryonic Fascist manifestations in this country, Mr. West has shown, in violently comic form, just what may be expected if and when the time comes for a last-ditch defense of the American myth.¹

The reviewer for the Nation felt that "Mr. West is heavy-handed but his book is stimulating and at times bitterly hilarious."² Florence Haxton Britten, who had praised

1. John Chamberlain, "Books of the Times," New York Times (June 19, 1934), p. L-17.

2. "Shorter Notices," Nation, CXXXIX (July 25, 1934), 112.

taking symbols literally described through a dream in which a symbol is actually fleshed. Chapt. IV--deadness and disorder; see *Lives of Bunyan and Tolstoy*. Chapt. VI--self-torture by conscious sinning: see life of any saint. And so on.³⁵

It is very probable that West did pick up ideas from these sources. But the avowal that *Lonelyhearts* is based on all the cases in these two books, added to West's insistence in the previous paragraph that "psychology has nothing to do with reality," indicates that *Lonelyhearts* is better understood on its own terms, without reference to case histories. It is also possible that West had read Gerhart Hauptmann's The Fool in Christ, in which the second coming is equally ineffective.

One of West's favorite authors in college was Euripides, whom he considered a fusion of the satirist and the man of feeling.³⁶ West was also a critical and compassionate man. And it is the combination of fullness of vision with intensity of effect that renders Miss Lonelyhearts one of the finest novels of the century.

35. West, "Some Notes on Miss L." p. 2.

36. Light, p. 30.

Miss Lonelyhearts lavishly, complained "not that it isn't good, but that it isn't better."³ More recently, S. J. Perelman has called attention to the place of the novel as the first anti-Fascist novel in the United States, antedating It Can't Happen Here.⁴ Leslie Fiedler paid the highest tribute to date, placing A Cool Million in a three-way tie with Henry Roth's Call It Sleep and John Peale Bailey's Act of Darkness as his favorite forgotten book.⁵

In the light of opinions such as these, it is difficult to understand the statement of A. M. Tibbetts that the novel has been "universally condemned."⁶ But it is equally inexplicable that the book has not been more widely read and better liked. A key to this injustice may be found in the statement of T. S. Matthews that "'A Cool Million' is not so successful a caricature as his earlier 'Miss Lonelyhearts,' and it can be taken in at a glance, but the glance is worth it."⁷ It is always a mistake to

3. Florence Haxton Britten, "Youth Against Age in Recent Leading Fiction," New York Herald Tribune Books, X (July 1, 1934), 9.

4. In an interview with Harvey Breit, "Go, West," New York Times Book Review, LXII (March 24, 1957), 8.

5. Leslie A. Fiedler, The American Scholar, XXV (Autumn, 1956), 478.

6. A. M. Tibbetts, "The Strange Half-World of Nathanael West," Prairie Schooner, XXXIV (1960), 8.

7. T. S. Matthews, "A Gallery of Novels," New Republic, LXXIX (July 18, 1934), 272.

try to take in a West novel at a glance. These books are more complex than their surface simplicity would indicate, as I hope the discussions of the first two novels have demonstrated. A careful reading of A Cool Million reveals a novel not as successful as its predecessor, but not unworthy of comparison with Candide.

West, as a matter of fact, must have had Voltaire's satire in mind as one of the models for his work. While not a strict imitation, A Cool Million does bear distinct similarities to the French classic in both superficial and more essential aspects. For instance, A Cool Million is composed of thirty-one short chapters; Candide has thirty. The three major characters of A Cool Million--Lemuel Pitkin, Betty Prail, and Mr. Whipple--more than roughly parallel Candide, Cunegonde, and Pangloss. Candide assaults that blind optimism which is buttressed by religion and philosophy. A Cool Million focuses on that indigenous American optimism which has received expression in the Horatio Alger myth. The similarity between the two books has been noticed before, but it has not been studied in any detail.⁸ Attention to the parallels affords, I believe, a better understanding of West's methods.

The novel is dedicated to S. J. Perelman, whose brand of humor is akin to A Cool Million's extravagant

8. Matthews, p. 271.

reductio ad absurdum. The inscription, "John D. Rockefeller would give a cool million to have a stomach like yours," is ironic. The story implies that most Americans would willingly trade their healthy stomachs for Rockefeller's cool million.

The first scene is the home of Mrs. Sarah Pitkin, a widow residing in Ottsville, Vermont. The residence is described in the pseudo-literary prose that is the hallmark of the novel: "It was a humble dwelling much the worse for wear, yet exceedingly dear to her and her only child, Lemuel" (p. 144). The narrator remarks that the house would have been of great interest to an antique dealer, had one chanced to pass by, since it dated from the American Revolution and expressed in its architecture the character of the colonists. It is, however, Lawyer Slemph who drops in, and his mission is one hallowed in the annals of melodrama. He has come to announce the imminent foreclosing of the mortgage by Squire Bird, who has not been satisfied with his twelve percent interest. The narrator explains, in a long parenthesis that flagrantly violates the fictional illusion, that he was correct in his original surmise. The house has been bought by an interior decorator, Mr. Asa Goldstein, who wants it for the window of his Fifth Avenue colonial shop. This is the first instance of the ironic duality that West sees as the great American hypocrisy. America makes a business of preserving

the colonial image, while it preys upon those who try to practice the colonial ideals.

As the lawyer is leaving, the widow's son Lemuel arrives. He and his mother give deep consideration to their predicament and the chapter ends with their resolution that Lem must seek the aid of Nathan "Shagpoke" Whipple, ex-President of the United States and now president of the Rat River National Bank.

The chapter follows the pattern of the two previous novels in setting a quick stage for the major issues of the book. The prose is laden with euphemisms, clichés, and stock narrative tags. Among the more offensive are: "well on in years" (p. 143), "owing to the straitened circumstances of the little family" (p. 143), "the poor lad" (p. 145), and "our hero" (p. 145). The last tag is utilized ad nauseam throughout the book. One passage in particular demonstrates the narrator's obsession with the conventional turn of phrase:

The poor widow told her son all we have recounted and the two of them sat plunged in gloom. No matter how they racked their brains, they could not discover a way to keep the roof over their heads (p. 146) (*italics mine*).

The dialogue is singularly unrealistic, partly because the narrator makes no attempt to suggest actual speech patterns and partly because the characters are engaged, more often than not, in spouting platitudes or protesting their virtue. The following passage illustrates

this stagey dialogue which can never really be called conversation:

"Where is your son, Lemuel?" continued the lawyer.

"He is in school. But it is nearly time for him to be home; he never loiters." And the mother's voice showed something of the pride she felt in her boy.

"Still in school!" exclaimed Mr. Slomp.

"Shouldn't he be helping to support you?"

"No," said the widow proudly. "I set great store by learning, as does my son. But you came on business?" (p. 144).

The trite style and the intrusions of the author parody the manner of popular melodramatic fiction, such as the Horatio Alger novels. The narrator is not West. He is an autonomous "character" responsible for the conventions of the plot and the poverty of the telling. Only occasionally does West give free play to his own imagination in the creation of a scene or a monologue. He achieves his satiric purpose through the agency of the narrator, who is as deluded by the American myth as are any of his characters. By tampering in an inconspicuous manner with the rags-to-riches story West is able to imitate the myth and to refute it at the same time. It is important to remember that a narrator has been created who is not West. Otherwise the events of the tale sometimes seem to justify the fascistic fears of the narrator and his characters, and the point of the satire seems confused. But such bugaboos as the conspiracy of the bolsheviks and the International

Jewish Bankers are the creation of the narrator's deluded imagination, not of West's.

In this first chapter, then, we are introduced to Lemuel Pitkin, son of the American Revolution, prototype of the red-blooded American boy. He is faced with a typical economic challenge which should not be unsurmountable for one with his qualifications of ambition, fair-mindedness, and education in American beliefs. After all, America is the land of opportunity. His case is a proving ground for the American Dream.

Shagpoke Whipple is a man of thrift and sobriety. The narrator takes the liberty of explicating one of Shagpoke's favorite adages:

"Don't teach your grandmother to suck eggs."
By this he meant that the pleasures of the body are like grandmothers, once they begin to suck eggs they never stop until all the eggs (purse) are dry (p. 147).

Lem arrives at sunset, just as the ex-President is lowering his flag. He thus gains the benefit of Whipple's apostrophe:

"All hail Old Glory! May you be the joy and pride of the American heart, alike when your gorgeous folds shall wanton in the summer air and your tattered fragments be dimly seen through clouds of war! May you ever wave in honor, hope and profit, in unsullied glory and patriotic fervor, on the dome of the Capitol, on the tented plain, on the wave-rocked topmast and on the roof of this garage!" (p. 148).

Shagpoke is only too glad to talk with Lem, "for the youth of a nation is its only hope" (p. 148). But his verbal

idealism is matched by his pragmatism in dealings. He is less generous with his money than with his time. He will not lend Lem the necessary \$1500--for the boy's own good. He can see his way, however, to advancing him \$30, with the family cow as collateral, so that the boy may make his fortune in the big city, as Shagpoke once did. Even more important than the money is the advice he offers free of charge, a statement of the American trust that in this country a person can become whatever he puts his mind to:

"America," he said with great seriousness, "is the land of opportunity. She takes care of the honest and industrious and never fails them as long as they are both. This is not a matter of opinion, it is one of faith. On the day that Americans stop believing it, on that day will America be lost.

"Let me warn you that you will find in the world a certain few scoffers who will laugh at you and attempt to do you injury. They will tell you that John D. Rockefeller was a thief and that Henry Ford and other great men are also thieves. Do not believe them. The story of Rockefeller and of Ford is the story of every great American, and you should strive to make it your story. Like them, you were born poor and on a farm. Like them, by honesty and industry, you cannot fail to succeed" (p. 150).

Lem vows to follow in the footsteps of the tycoons. "When he had gone, the great man turned to the picture of Lincoln that hung on the wall and silently communed with it" (p. 151).

The most frightening thing about Whipple is that he believes his own lies. He possesses that common human capacity for double or triple thinking. He is an

exhibitionist, but he does not drop the role even when alone. His caricature is made complete by the forensic mode of his speech. Whenever he opens his mouth, soapbox oratory inevitably pours forth. The reader imagines that Whipple must talk to himself in rhetoric. In fact, Whipple has become so completely a creature of the rhetorical lie that he can believe in American opportunity at the same time that he is active in the thwarting of that opportunity.

On his way home, "our hero" comes upon young Betty Prail being chased by a mad dog. The two strike an incredibly melodramatic pose:

"Oh, save me, Mr. Pitkin!" she exclaimed, clasping her hands.

"I will," said Lem resolutely (p. 151).

Lem kills the dog, which happens to belong to Tom Baxter, the town bully. In language as ungrammatical as Lem's is precious, Baxter berates the boy for killing his dog. Good squares off against Evil. As if it were not irritating enough that the contest is the threadbare opposition of brute force to scientific method, the narrator must underline the cliché:

That Tom Baxter was not only larger but stronger than our hero was no doubt true. On the other hand he did not know how to use his strength. It was merely undisciplined brute force. If he could have got Lem around the waist the latter would have been at his mercy, but our hero knew that well enough and didn't choose to allow it. He was a pretty fair boxer, and stood on his defense, calm and wary (pp. 153-154).

Here the story takes its first unusual turn. Baxter tricks his naive opponent into shaking hands and bearhugs him unconscious. Lem here resembles Candide more than Horatio Alger. And Betty finds herself in a plight common to Cunegonde. She faints and, as Baxter stands above her, the leering narrator suggests the scene that his hypocrisy will not allow him to describe: "His little pig-like eyes shone with bestiality" (p. 154).

At the beginning of the fourth chapter, the narrator again shatters the reader's suspension of disbelief by explaining his direction of the novel:

It is with reluctance that I leave Miss Prail in the lecherous embrace of Tom Baxter to begin a new chapter, but I cannot with propriety continue my narrative beyond the point at which the bully undressed that unfortunate lady.

However, as Miss Prail is the heroine of this romance, I would like to use this opportunity to acquaint you with a little of her past history (p. 155).

Betty's troubles, it seems, all began on her twelfth birthday when a fire destroyed her house, her parents, and, in the narrator's euphemism, "something which, like her parents, could never be replaced" (p. 155). The local firefighters were not the heroic public servants one might expect. They looted the house and let the fire extinguish itself. Their chief, Bill Baxter, father of her latest violator, enticed Betty into the woodshed, where she was found the next morning. After two years in the orphanage,

she was placed as a maid with Lawyer Slemp's family. There, like Cinderella, she suffered the harshness of Slemp's shrewish wife and two ugly daughters. Slemp himself, "a deacon in the church and a very stern man," administered beatings on her bare behind twice weekly, for which she received a weekly fifty cents.

Betty, then, has had ample experience of the world's vicissitudes. Whether she has learned anything from experience or whether she is still blinded by the lies of optimism remains to be seen.

Sadistic sex is particularly evident in these pages. Whereas the men in Delehanty's dreamed of rape, the creatures of this narrator's imagination succeed. Slemp, like Lonelyhearts, mixes his religion with sadism. And the narrator plainly enjoys his fantasy to the fullest.

Lem awakes at last and returns home. His mother gladly signs away the family cow because "like all mothers, Mrs. Pitkin was certain that her child must succeed" (p. 158). On the train, Lem strikes up a conversation with a newsboy, "a young boy with an honest, open countenance" (p. 158). The two boys, with the native philistinism of true Americans, agree that they "ain't much on story reading" (p. 158). Lem is soon joined by a Mr. Wellington Mape, suave, self-styled millionaire, who sits next to him. In the course of their conversation, the book's title is echoed:

"Are you in business, Mr. Mape?" he asked.

"Well, ahem!" was that suave individual's rejoinder. "I'm afraid I'm rather an idler. My father left me a cool million, so I don't feel the need of working."

"A cool million!" ejaculated Lem. "Why, that's ten times a hundred thousand dollars" (p. 159).

Mape has no trouble learning how much money the boy is carrying and where it is concealed. Soon after Mape leaves, Lem discovers he has had his pocket picked.

Steve, the newsboy, is able to clarify the ruse to Lem because, though wholesome in appearance, "he had been 'wire'--scout--to a 'leather' when small and knew all about the dodge" (p. 161). Lem's indignation is impotent. But luck is with him--the thief has lost his diamond ring in Lem's pocket. It appears that fate is, after all, watching over the innocent. But Lem is immediately cheated by a supposed pawnbroker who under-appraises the ring and buys it for \$28.60 and a promise to hold it for its rightful owner. Lem's soul is at peace after this transaction--for a few moments at least. Then the train is boarded by police who arrest Lem for the theft of the diamond ring.

Lem's troubles have certainly begun to snowball in a fashion worthy of Candide. But his treatment by the police is crucial. West implies that if one is to believe in America as a land of opportunity, one must demand proof that its law-enforcement, the bastion of fair play, is above reproof. The case is otherwise. The police

sergeant and two detectives are Irish stereotypes who knock Lem unconscious, submit him to the third degree, and kick him in the stomach and behind the ear. Lem is convicted after the district attorney bribes the phony pawnbroker to turn state's evidence. The narrator contributes a piece of inane commentary that betrays his ability to miss the significance of his own story completely: "It would be hard to say from this that justice is not swift. Although, knowing the truth, we must add that it is not always sure" (p. 165).

The warden of the state prison is a humanist:

"My son, the way of the transgressor is hard, but at your age it is still possible to turn from it. However, do not squirm, for you will get no sermon from me" (p. 165).

The narrator lends a helping hand: "(Lem was not squirming. The warden's expression was purely rhetorical.)" (p. 165). Warden Ezekiel Purdy's humanitarianism takes the form of a peculiarly refined sadism. He is a fanatical believer in preventive medicine, physical and social. He orders Lem's teeth removed so that they will never become infected. Secondly, he prescribes cold showers to cure Lem's morbidity because he is "merely sick, as are all criminals" (p. 166). This handy assumption absolves society and human nature as well as the individual criminal of moral guilt. The loss of his teeth is the first stage in the dismantling of Lemuel Pitkin.

Chapter Eight flashes back to Betty Prail, who has awakened to find, of all things, that she has been abducted by Italian-speaking white slavers. Given his super-patriotic bias, it is not surprising that the narrator has made the villains foreigners. Once again his hypocrisy colors the telling:

The trip was an exceedingly rough one for our heroine. The wagon in which she was conveyed had no springs to speak of, and her captors made her serve a severe apprenticeship to the profession they planned for her to follow (p. 167).

The narrator builds upon his theme of foreign immorality. Betty is destined for Chinatown, more specifically the "House of All Nations" of Wu Fong. This worthy entrepreneur has commissioned the Italians to find him a New England girl for reasons which the narrator assumes will infuriate any American worth his salt:

Wu Fong was confident that he would soon have his six hundred dollars back with interest, for many of his clients were from non-Aryan countries and would appreciate the services of a genuine American. Apropos of this, it is lamentable but a fact, nevertheless, that the inferior races greatly desire the women of their superiors. This is why the Negroes rape so many white women in our southern states (p. 169).

The interior decoration of Wu Fong's brothel is the first major description in which West has exercised his imagination directly, rather than indirectly through parody. The rooms have been created with scrupulous historicity:

Each one of the female inmates of Wu Fong's establishment had a tiny suite for her own use, furnished and decorated in the style of the country from which she came. Thus, Marie, the French girl, had an apartment that was Directoire. Celeste's rooms (there were two French girls because of their traditional popularity) were Louis the Fourteenth; she being the fatter of the two (p. 169).

Wu Fong is, as W. H. Auden has pointed out, practically the only admirable character in the novel, because he is, at least, a genius in his own line of endeavor.⁹ The narrator, who is so much less likeable, appends a moral in one of his chronic parentheses:

Wu Fong was a great stickler for detail, and, like many another man, if he had expended as much energy and thought honestly he would have made even more money without having to carry the stigma of brothel-keeper. Alas! (p. 170).

The chapter closes with Betty awaiting her first customer, "a pockmarked Armenian rug merchant from Malta" (p. 171). This is consistent with the ethnocentric myopia which has stereotyped the white-slavers as Italian, the brothel-keeper as Chinese, the girls as "of all nations," the interior decorator as Jewish, and the clientele as largely foreign. When viewed in the objective setting of fiction, this aspect of national egoism is a particularly ugly trait. It is also conducive to fascism, as Hitler amply demonstrated. West's attack is effective. The reader catches himself acquiescing in the racial stereotyping--because the process is such a familiar one.

9. W. H. Auden, The Dyer's Hand and other essays (New York, 1963), pp. 244-245.

In Chapter Nine, West accelerates his political satire. Shagpoke Whipple has also been committed to prison for irregularities in his bank. Characteristically, he blames not himself, but the nebulous scapegoats of un-American lineage:

"Such is the gratitude of the mob, but in a way I can't blame them," Mr. Whipple said with all the horse sense for which he was famous. "Rather do I blame Wall Street and the Jewish international bankers. They loaded me up with a lot of European and South American bonds, then they forced me to the wall. It was Wall Street working hand and hand with the Communists that caused my downfall. The bankers broke me and the Communists circulated lying rumors about my bank in Doc Slack's barber shop. I was the victim of an un-American conspiracy."

Mr. Whipple sighed again, then said in a militant tone of voice: "My boy, when we get out of here, there are two evils undermining this country which we must fight tooth and nail. These two archenemies of the American Spirit, the spirit of fair play and open competition, are Wall Street and the Communists" (p. 172).

At this point West is getting down to 1930's brass tacks. The tone of his novel is not that of Dos Passos, Farrell, Caldwell, and Lewis, but the target is the same--that smokescreen of Americanism which covers such a multitude of social injustices. He was always aware, however, that he was simply not running in the main current of social protest:

All my books always fall between the different schools of writing. The radical press, although I consider myself on their side, doesn't like my particular kind of joking, and think it even

Fascist sometimes, and the literature boys, whom I detest, detest me in turn. The high-brow press finds that I avoid the big, significant things and the lending library touts in the daily press think me shocking and what, in the novels of Michael Arlen, is called 'bad hat.' The proof of all this is that I've never had the same publisher twice --once bitten, etc.--because there is nothing to root for in my work and what is even worse, no rooters."¹⁰

Norman Podhoretz has added the most cogent footnote to West's classification of his own work:

Nothing could be further from the spirit of his work than a faith in the power of new social arrangements or economic systems to alleviate the misery of the human condition. West was one of the few novelists of the thirties who succeeded in generalizing the horrors of the depression into a universal image of human suffering. His "particular kind of joking" has profoundly political implications; it is a way of saying that the universe is always rigged against us and that our efforts to contend with it invariably lead to absurdity. This sort of laughter--which, paradoxically, has the most intimate connection with compassion--is rarely heard in American literature, for it is not only anti-"radical" but almost un-American in its refusal to admit the possibility of improvement, amelioration, or cure.¹¹

West and Podhoretz are both right. West's pessimism is too complete to allow any belief in utopias or millenia. Nevertheless, his work does have social significance because it attacks with such great accuracy the status quo.

10. Richard B. Gehman, "Introduction" to The Day of the Locust (New York, 1950), pp. xxii-xxiii.

11. Norman Podhoretz, "A Particular Kind of Joking," New Yorker, XXXIII (May 18, 1957), 144.

An example is Whipple's definition of the American Spirit-- "the spirit of fair play and open competition." This is a relatively accurate statement of the American self-image. It is also ambiguous, since in reality open competition is not in league with fair play but at war with it. Lemuel Pitkin is the spirit of fair play; Tom Baxter, unhampered by ethics, carries off the spoils. Viewed in this light, the American Spirit is self-contradictory. Whipple and his constituents do not choose to examine their creed this closely. But West's unrelenting logic serves the cause of social protest by exposing present conditions, even if it proceeds without much hope in the future.

Shagpoke has bad tidings for Lem. Home and cow have been despoiled and his mother has disappeared. But Shagpoke holds his own career up as inspiration to the boy:

"I am an American businessman, and this place is just an incident in my career. My boy, I believe I once told you that you had an almost certain chance to succeed because you were born poor and on a farm. Let me now tell you that your chance is even better because you have been in prison" (p. 173).

The educational value of a prison term is a cliché not only of popular fiction but of serious writing as well.

Theodore Dreiser's epic financier and titan, Frank Cowperwood, served an apprenticeship behind bars, as did his real life counterpart, Yerkes. They were not victims of international conspiracies. Rather, their convictions were symptomatic of defects in the free enterprise system,

in which it seemed necessary to be ruthless to prevail. Penology does not support the view that youthful incarceration builds Christian gentlemen. But the Whipple interpretation coasts along on the wings of a handful of misinterpreted examples.

Eventually Shagpoke works up to a rhetorical affirmation of New World opportunity, again documented by the extraordinary or mythical example:

"America is still a young country . . . and like all young countries, it is rough and unsettled. Here a man is a millionaire one day and a pauper the next, but no one thinks the worse of him. The wheel will turn, for that is the nature of wheels. Don't believe the fools who will tell you that the poor man hasn't got a chance to get rich any more because the country is full of chain stores. Office boys still marry their employers' daughters. Shipping clerks are still becoming presidents of railroads. Why, only the other day, I read where an elevator operator won a hundred thousand dollars in a sweepstake and was made a partner in a brokerage house. Despite the Communists and their vile propaganda against individualism, this is still the golden land of opportunity. Oil wells are still found in people's back yards. There are still gold mines hidden away in our mountain fastnesses. America is . . ." (p. 174).

His reverie is interrupted by the prison guard. Shagpoke and Shrike have one thing in common--an affinity for the extended monologue. They are opposite sides of the same coin. West uses Shrike as a direct mouthpiece for refutations of idealism. Whipple's oratory is so typical, and yet so transparent, that it is a refutation of itself.

Only slightly less impressive is Warden Purdy. When Lem is released after the capture of the real thief, Purdy pulls out all the stops on the sophistry of optimism to prove, like Pangloss, that all is best in this best of all possible worlds:

"Suppose you had obtained a job in New York City that paid fifteen dollars a week. You were here with us in all twenty weeks, so you lost the use of three hundred dollars. However, you paid no board while you were here, which was a saving for you of about seven dollars a week or one hundred and forty dollars. This leaves you the loser by one hundred and forty dollars. But it would have cost you at least two hundred dollars to have all your teeth extracted, so you're really ahead of the game forty dollars. Also, the set of false teeth I gave you cost twenty dollars new and is worth at least fifteen dollars in its present condition. This makes your profit about fifty-five dollars. Not at all a bad sum for a lad of your age to save in twenty weeks" (p. 175).

At last Lem arrives in New York City, sporting his new china choppers. He shows that he has mastered his lesson in sophistry. Asa Goldstein has transported Lem's home to a colonial shop on Fifth Avenue, and Lem earns two dollars for advice concerning the interior decorations. He bolsters his optimism with paper statistics:

Our hero was considerably elated at his stroke of luck and marveled at the ease with which two dollars could be earned in New York. At this rate of pay, he calculated, he would earn ninety-six dollars for a six-day week. If he could keep it up, he would have a million in no time (p. 179).

Back on the Avenue, Lem risks his life to save Mr. Levi Underdown, president of Underdown National Bank and

Trust Company, and his beautiful daughter from being trampled by Asa Goldstein's runaway horses. Lem gets no thanks; rather, he is blamed by Underdown. Furthermore, a flying stone has damaged one of his eyes. An insurance claims adjustor tricks him into signing a release for ten dollars. This legendary situation of a runaway carriage, a rich father, a beautiful daughter, and a brave youth does not follow the usual script. It is not the turning point in Lem's fortunes; it is simply another stage in his dismantling.

Sylvanus Snodgrasse, a poet, arrives upon the scene. Lem and the narrator share a philistine suspicion of poets. The narrator goes so far as to restrict the word with ironic quotation marks. Actually West's knife here is double-edged. He satirizes American distrust of culture, but he cannot resist a few jabs at the "literature boys." Thus, he portrays Snodgrasse as the provincial artist:

"Mr. Pitkin," he said grandly, "I intend to write an ode about the deed performed by you this day. You do not perhaps appreciate, having a true hero's modesty, the significance of your classicality--if I may be permitted a neologism--of your performance. Poor Boy, Flying Team, Banker's Daughter . . . it's in the real American tradition and perfectly fitted to my native lyre. Fie on your sickly Prousts, U. S. poets must write about the U. S." (p. 183).

Snodgrasse, like that earlier American bard, Balso Snell, is infatuated by horse symbolism:

"One of the striking things about his heroism is the dominance of the horse motif, involving,

as it does, not one but two horses. This is important because the depression has made all of us Americans conscious of certain spiritual lacks, not the least of which is the symbolic horse" (p. 183).

Snodgrasse is a charlatan. His confederates pick everyone's pockets, Lem's included. After the crowd has dispersed, a policeman finds Lem on the ground. He automatically delivers several kicks to Lem's groin before he decides to call an ambulance.

At the hospital, Lem's right eye is removed. Outside he runs into Shagpoke Whipple, wearing a coonskin cap. Whipple explains his disillusionment with the Democratic Party, under whose auspices he had been President:

"When I left jail, it was my intention to run for office again. But I discovered to my great amazement and utter horror that my party, the Democratic Party, carried not a single plank in its platform that I could honestly endorse. Rank socialism was and is rampant. How could I, Shagpoke Whipple, ever bring myself to accept a program which promised to take from American citizens their inalienable birthright; the right to sell their labor and their children's labor without restrictions as to either price or hours?" (p. 186).

By putting definitions such as this into the mouth of Whipple, West clarifies the semantic blurring of capitalistic dogma.

Whipple's time has arrived. He mounts a soapbox to begin his recruiting among the derelicts. He shouts a few slogans to catch their attention:

"Remember the River Raisin!
 "Remember the Alamo!
 "Remember the Maine!" (p. 187).

He promises the unemployed a relief from their frustrations:

"Well, that's the only and prime purpose of the National Revolutionary Party--to get jobs for everyone. There was enough work to go around in 1927, why isn't there enough now? I'll tell you; because of the Jewish international bankers and the Bolshevik labor unions, that's why. It was those two agents that did most to hinder American business and to destroy its glorious expansion. The former because of their hatred of America and love for Europe and the latter because of their greed for higher and still higher wages (p. 188).

He provides the men with scapegoats to relieve their guilt and undirected anger:

"We must drive the Jewish international bankers out of Wall Street! We must destroy the Bolshevik labor unions! We must purge our country of all the alien elements and ideas that now infest her!

"America for Americans! Back to the principles of Andy Jackson and Abe Lincoln!" (p. 188).

In this speech, West has identified the conditions attendant upon the birth of fascism: (1) an egomaniac leader; (2) a myth of national superiority; (3) widespread economic and spiritual frustrations; (4) scapegoats. A depression causes curious reactions within a nation which looks upon itself as superior. It is difficult for such a nation to set its house in order because this would betray the fallibility of the national system. Instead a crusade is focused against foreign enemies or ghettoed minority groups. Shagpoke's whipping boys, the Jews and the

Communists, were, of course, the very scapegoats employed by Hitler.

The debut of the American fascists is blighted by a fat man in a Chesterfield overcoat, agent for both the Bolsheviks and the International Jewish Bankers. He summons riot troops from both organizations and the rally is dispersed with great violence. The incongruous alliance helps to make the whole tale incredible and to suggest that the conspiracy is a figment of the imagination of the narrator.

Just as Lem has hit rock-bottom and has taken up a place among the bums on the park benches, his loss of an eye proves an unexpected boon. He is employed as part of a con game that involves his pretending to lose his eye in jewelry shops. Lem does not suspect that he is part of a racket. With his new affluence, he is able to live decently again.

At the boarding house, Lem meets a gay young blade by the name of Sam Perkins. West was always economical with names; for example, Fay Doyle and Faye Greener, Simpson the clean old man and Homer Simpson, Lonelyhearts' girl Betty and Betty Prail. In this case he has given the youth exactly the same name as Samuel Perkins, the nosologist of Balso Snell and subject of Miss McGeeney's biography. It seems unlikely that the repetition was unconscious. But one searches in vain for

any significance in the repetition. Perhaps West thought it would be of interest to draw Perkins in his flaming young manhood. Or perhaps he had become convinced that Balso's audience was destined to be a small one and felt the name was too comical to waste. At any rate, Sam and Lem are not comfortable companions because Perkins is the spoiled son of a wealthy family and Lem's puritan upbringing and slender means do not allow him to ape the other's frivolous life. This is one of the spots that may have made the radical critics suspicious of West's social allegiances. For Lem is such a thrifty prude that the reader inclines to prefer Perkins with his inherited leisure and bourgeois hedonism.

Lem accompanies Perkins to Chinatown where the boys part because Lem refuses to enter a speakeasy. Lem happens past Wu Fong's "laundry." A bottle crashes at his feet revealing a note. As he stoops to retrieve it, a sinister Chinaman glides up behind him with a knife. At this pseudo-suspenseful moment, the narrator concludes the chapter.

The next chapter describes the plight of Betty Prail inside Wu Fong's laundry-brothel. It is Betty who threw the note to Lem. The narrator again antagonizes those sexual jealousies which are at least a partial cause of racial and national hatreds:

Since then numbers of orientals, Slavs, Latins, Celts, and Semites had visited her, sometimes as many as three in one night. However, so large a number was rare because Wu Fong held her at a price much above that of the other female inmates (p. 201).

Betty, being a wholesome American girl, has not been corrupted by her internship. The foreigners may ravish her body, but her soul is inviolable:

Naturally enough, Betty was not quite as happy in her situation as was Wu Fong. At first she struggled against the series of "husbands" that were forced on her, but when all her efforts proved futile she adapted herself as best she could to her onerous duties. Nevertheless, she was continuously seeking a method of escape (p. 201).

The passage is a good example not only of the narrator's chronic euphemisms, but also of his clumsy attempts at ironic understatement.

West must have been conscious of his success in creating Wu Fong's brothel, because he decides to go himself one better. Wu Fong, finding himself overstocked in these depression times, has decided to specialize. He has fired the foreign girls and commissioned Asa Goldstein to create an All-American decor:

Lena Haubengrauber from Perkiomen Creek, Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Her rooms were filled with painted pine furniture and decorated with slip ware, chalk ware and "Gaudy Dutch." Her simple farm dress was fashioned of bright gingham.

Alice Sweethorne from Paducah, Kentucky. Besides many fine pieces of old Sheraton from Savannah, in her suite there was a wonderful iron grille from Charleston whose beauty of workmanship made every visitor gasp with

pleasure. She wore a ball gown of the Civil War period (p. 203).

And so on. The culmination of Wu Fong's (and West's) comic tour de force is the cuisine:

When a client visited Lena Haubengrauber, it was possible for him to eat roast groundhog and drink Sam Thompson rye. While with Alice Sweethorne, he was served sow-belly with grits and bourbon. In Mary Judkin's rooms he received, if he so desired, fried squirrel and corn liquor. In the suite occupied by Patricia Van Riis, lobster and champagne wine were the rule. The patrons of Powder River Rose usually ordered mountain oysters and washed them down with forty-rod. And so on down the list: while with Dolores O'Reilly, tortillas and prune brandy from the Imperial Valley; while with Princess Roan Fawn, baked dog and firewater; while with Betty Prail, fish chowder and Jamaica rum. Finally, those who sought the favors of the "Modern Girl," Miss Cobina Wiggs, were regaled with tomato and lettuce sandwiches and gin (pp. 204-205).

The scene is first of all an imaginative spree. But it is also functional since West makes it clear that Wu Fong is conforming to the "Buy American" campaign of the Hearst papers.

Once again the scene shifts. Lem has been abducted by the Chinaman. He is dressed in a sailor boy's suit and introduced to a homosexual maharajah. Lem, the pure-minded American youth, has no familiarity with these deviations allegedly so typical among the inferior nationalities:

The maharajah minced up to our hero, who was conscious only of the man in the closet, and put his arm around the lad's waist.

"Thom on, pithy boy, giff me a kith," he said with a leer that transfigured his otherwise unremarkable visage into a thing of evil.

A wave of disgust made Lem's hair stand on end. "Does he think me a girl?" the poor lad wondered. "No, he called me a boy at least twice" (p. 207).

Lem is saved when both his false teeth and glass eye clatter to the floor, taking the edge off the maharajah's appetite. He is beaten and thrown into the street.

In quick succession, another Irish stereotype, Officer Riley, throws Lem into jail for trying to make trouble for Wu Fong, "the biggest man in the district," and a Jewish stereotype, the shyster lawyer, Seth Abromowitz, charges him ninety dollars for a preliminary conference in which Lem rejects his services. However, the prosecuting attorney, eager to ease his own burden, convinces Lem to settle for thirty days in the pokey on a guilty plea. This is a fair deal, since Lem has been charged with disorderly conduct, assaulting an officer, conspiring to overthrow the government, and participating in the glim racket. To Lem's desperate protestations of innocence the prosecutor replies, "So was Christ . . . and they nailed Him" (p. 211).

Upon his release, Lem rushes to the bank, only to find that Seth Abromowitz has attached his funds. Completely demoralized, he stumbles into the street where he is propositioned by a streetwalker--Betty Prail. Betty has certainly been through the mill. But her optimism is steadfast. She gives Lem a pep talk in the best big sister tradition:

"To make an omelet you have to break eggs," said Betty. "When you've lost both your eyes, you can talk. I read only the other day about a man who lost both of his eyes yet accumulated a fortune. I forget how, but he did. Then, too, think of Henry Ford. He was dead broke at forty and borrowed a thousand dollars from James Couzens; when he paid him back it had become thirty-eight million dollars. You're only seventeen and say you're a failure. Lem Pitkin, I'm surprised at you (p. 215).

The re-union of Betty and Lem is another event reminiscent of the peregrinations of Cunegonde and Candide. Unlike those unfortunates, however, Betty and Lem are sadder but not much wiser. Then, just as Candide periodically crossed the harried path of Pangloss, the indefatigable lovers run into Whipple and Jake Raven in Grand Central Station. They join their leader on a trip West to Raven's gold mine. In Chicago, they get off the train during a layover to run a few errands. Lem, alone, is tricked into getting into a taxi with the man in the Chesterfield overcoat. Holding a gun to Lem's head, this agent of the Third Internationale is about to extort information about Raven's gold mine when the taxi collides with another vehicle. Lem wakes in an ambulance, where he discovers that he has lost a thumb. Refusing aid, he rushes to the train to re-join Whipple.

In the mining country of the Sierra Nevadas, a new character makes his appearance. The stranger's distinction is having been born in Pike County, Missouri:

"You must have been born in the woods not to have heard of Pike County," he said. "The smartest fighters come from there. I kin whip my weight in wildcats, am a match for a dozen Injuns to oncet, and can tackle a lion without flinchin'" (p. 223).

This caricature of the Western bad man satirizes the concept of rugged individualism. He is also a familiar type in Western literature and a distant cousin of the traditional literary braggart.

The stranger clashes verbally with Lem, with Whipple, and with Jake Raven. In each case he sings the above refrain. His only other staple of conversation is the telling of his recent bloody deeds:

"We was ridin' together over in Alameda County. We'd met permisuous, like we've met tonight. I was tellin' him how four b'ars attacked me to oncet, and how I fit 'em all single-handed, when he laughed and said he reckoned I'd been drinkin' and seed double. If he'd a-know'd me better he wouldn't have done it."

"What did you do?" asked Betty in horror.

"What did I do, madam?" echoed the Pike County man ferociously. "I told him he didn't realize who he'd insulted. I told him I was a ring-tail squealer and a rip-tail roarer. I told him he had to fight, and asked him how it would be. Foot or fist, or tooth and nail, or claw and mudscraper, or knife, gun and tommy-hawk."

"Did he fight?" asked Lem.

"He had to."

"How did it come out?"

"I shot him through the heart," said the Missourian coldly.

"His bones are bleachin' in the canyon where he fell" (p. 226).

This is a reflection of the common assumption that braggarts and bullies are at heart cowards who can be put down by anyone willing to stand his ground. West, however, inverts the myth. The stranger boasts that "It's my policy always to shoot an Injun on sight. The only good Injun is a dead one, is what I alluz say" (pp. 224-225). The first time the group is scattered, the Pike County man shoots Jake Raven, rapes and abducts Betty. Lem tries to intervene and falls into a bear trap.

The sequence scores a multiple success. First, the Pike County scoundrel comes to life as more than a caricature. Secondly, West has overturned another literary convention. He has thirdly satirized America's romanticization of its frontier past.

The wounded Jake Raven crawls to the Indian camp. There a demagogue rises to avenge this latest blow to Indian pride:

The chief's name was Israel Satinpenny. He had been to Harvard and hated the white man with undying venom. For many years now, he had been trying to get the Indian nations to rise and drive the palefaces back to the countries from which they had come, but so far he had had little success. His people had grown soft and lost their warlike ways. Perhaps, with the wanton wounding of Jake Raven, his chance had come (p. 231).

Satinpenny's warmongering oration deserves to be quoted in full since it is the most explicit statement in the novel of West's own criticisms of Western civilization:

"Red men!" he thundered. "The time has come to protest in the name of the Indian peoples and to cry out against that abomination of abominations, the paleface.

"In our father's memory this was a fair, sweet land, where a man could hear his heart beat without wondering if what he heard wasn't an alarm clock, where a man could fill his nose with pleasant flower odors without finding they came from a bottle. Need I speak of springs that had never known the tyranny of iron pipes? Of deer that had never tasted hay? Of wild ducks that had never been banded by the U. S. Department of Conservation?

"In return for the loss of these things, we accepted the white man's civilization, syphilis and the radio, tuberculosis and the cinema. We accepted his civilization because he himself believed in it. But now that he has begun to doubt, why should we continue to accept? His final gift to us is doubt, a soul-corroding doubt. He rotted this land in the name of progress, and now it is he himself who is rotting. The stench of his fear stinks in the nostrils of the great god Manitou.

"In what way is the white man wiser than the red? We lived here from time immemorial and everything was sweet and fresh. The paleface came and in his wisdom filled the sky with smoke and the rivers with refuse. What, in his wisdom, was he doing? I'll tell you. He was making clever cigarette lighters. He was making superb fountain pens. He was making paper bags, doorknobs, leatherette satchels. All the powers of water, air and earth he made to turn his wheels within wheels within wheels. They turned, sure enough, and the land was flooded with toilet paper, painted boxes to keep pins in, key rings, watch fobs, leatherette satchels.

"When the paleface controlled the things he manufactured, we red men could only wonder at and praise his ability to hide his vomit. But now all the secret places of the earth are full. Now even the Grand Canyon will no longer hold razor blades. Now the dam, O warriors, has broken and he is up to his neck in the articles of his manufacture.

"He has loused the continent up good. But is he trying to de-louse it? No, all his efforts go to keep on lousing up the joint. All that worries him is how he can go on making little painted boxes for pins, watch fobs, leatherette satchels.

"Don't mistake me, Indians. I'm no Rousseauistic philosopher. I know that you can't put the clock back. But there is one thing you can do. You can stop that clock. You can smash that clock.

"The time is ripe. Riot and profaneness, poverty and violence are everywhere. The gates of pandemonium are open and through the land stalk the gods Mapeeo and Suraniou.

"The day of vengeance is here. The star of the paleface is sinking and he knows it. Spengler has said so; Valery has said so; thousands of his wise men proclaim it.

"O, brothers, this is the time to run upon his neck and the bosses of his armor. While he is sick and fainting, while he is dying of a surfeit of shoddy" (pp. 232-233).

West is not a Rousseauistic philosopher either, but he is almost certainly under the influence of Spengler and, to a lesser degree, Valery. West is the most nihilistic of American novelists; Spengler saw the history of man determined to repeat itself in a meaningless cycle. The Decline of the West ends with the quotation, "Ducunt Fata volentem, nolentem trahunt."¹² West was especially pessimistic about the conditions of life in the twentieth century; Spengler saw the modern era as the end-phenomenon of a civilization cycle. Noting that "each culture . . . has its own mode of spiritual extinction,"¹³ he analyzed the last stage of Western (Faustian) civilization:

12. Oswald Spengler, Perspectives of World History, Volume II of The Decline of the West (New York, 1957), p. 507.

13. Spengler, Form and Actuality, Volume I of The Decline of the West (New York, 1926), p. 256.

What we have before us is three forms of Nihilism, using the word in Nietzsche's sense. In each case, the ideals of yesterday, the religious and artistic and political forms that have grown up through the centuries, are undone; yet even in this last act, this self-repudiation, each several Culture employs the prime-symbol of its whole existence. The Faustian nihilist--Ibsen or Nietzsche, Marx or Wagner--shatters the ideals. . . . Socialism . . . is defensive like Stoicism, but what it defends is not the pose but the working-out of the life; and more, it is offensive-defensive, for with a powerful thrust into distance it spreads itself into all future and over all mankind, which shall be brought under one single regimen. . . . Even the notion of a Socialist Nirvana has its justification in so far that European weariness covers its flight from the struggle of existence under catch-words of world-peace, Humanity and brotherhood of Man.¹⁴

West and Spengler both seem to have seen themselves as necessary symptoms of a declining world.

All of West's novels mirror Spengler's theories. The philosopher railed, somewhat inconsistently, against the artistic anarchy which is mirrored in Balso Snell:

We can learn all we wish to know about the art-clamour which a megalopolis sets up in order to forget that its art is dead from the Alexandria of the year 200. There, as here in our world-cities, we find a pursuit of illusions of artistic progress, of personal peculiarity, of "the new style," of "unsuspected possibilities," theoretical babble, pretentious fashionable artists, weight-lifters with cardboard dumb-bells--the "Literary Man" in the Poet's place, the unabashed farce of Expressionism which the art-trade has organized as a "phase of art history," thinking and feeling and forming as industrial art. Alexandria, too, had problem dramatists and box-office artists whom it

14. Ibid., p. 257.

preferred to Sophocles, and painters who invented new tendencies and successfully bluffed their public. What do we possess today as "art"? A faked music, filled with artificial noisiness of massed instruments; a faked painting, full of idiotic, exotic and showcard effects, that every ten years or so concocts out of the form-wealth of millenia some new "style" which is in fact no style at all since everyone does as he pleases; a lying plastic that steals from Assyria, Egypt and Mexico indifferently. Yet this and only this, the taste of the "man of the world," can be accepted as the expression and sign of the age; everything else, everything that "sticks to" old ideals, is for provincial consumption.¹⁵

Shrike and Lonelyhearts both represent types symptomatic of the decline:

Atheism, rightly understood, is the necessary expression of a spirituality that had accomplished itself and exhausted its religious possibilities, and is declining into the inorganic.¹⁶

But from Skepsis there is a path to "second religiousness," which is the sequel and not the preface of the Culture. Men dispense with proof, desire only to believe and not to dissect.¹⁷

The Day of the Locust embodies Spengler's theories in a number of ways. The most obvious is the apocalyptic ending in which a festering civilization erupts into chaos.

Paul Valery, while not adhering to the strict historical determinism of Spengler, felt that Western civilization had sealed its own doom by making technology available to less developed areas, thus shifting the lever

15. Ibid., p. 294.

16. Ibid., p. 408.

17. Ibid., p. 424.

of power from intellectual concentration to sheer force of numbers. In other words, China with all its people is a less powerful nation than little Great Britain with its atom bomb. But when both nations are equal in nuclear power, China's sheer size will be enough to carry the day. In Valery's words, "We have been fools enough to make forces proportional to masses."¹⁸ Valery may have held a further appeal for West. He dealt, in poetry and in prose, with a "tedium of living" which is the closest equivalent to the spiritual aridity of Miss Lonelyhearts and Tod Hackett:

I mean, understand me, not the passing ennui, the tedium that comes of fatigue, or the tedium of which we can see the germ or of which we know the limits; but that perfect tedium that is not caused by misfortune or infirmity, that is compatible with apparently the happiest of all conditions--that tedium, in short, the stuff of which is nothing else than life itself, and which has no other second cause than the clear-sightedness of the living man. This absolute tedium is essentially nothing but life in its nakedness when it sees itself with unclouded eyes.¹⁹

It is not difficult to understand why West's writing was greeted with suspicion by radicals. For some reason he felt obligated to agitate for social reform and to satirize, very effectively, the status quo. But his

18. Paul Valery, Selected Writings, (New York, 1950), p. 121.

19. Ibid., p. 193.

pessimism extended beyond the mere present to the inevitable meaninglessness of a life made short by death.

Satinpenny's oration accomplishes its purpose. An international Indian uprising is touched off. Lem loses his scalp, but his life is saved because a brave is unable to start a fire with two sticks. The Indian rebellion is doomed to failure because the redskins have been contaminated by white dependence on gadgets.

Lem, now lacking his teeth, an eye, a thumb, a leg, and a scalp, is nursed back to relative health by Mr. Whipple. For a while the two subsist on earnings from an impromptu sideshow, in which Lem exhibits himself as the sole survivor of the Yuba River massacre. Soon their show is incorporated into the "Chamber of American Horrors, Animate and Inanimate Hideosities," with Sylvanus Snodgrasse as impresario. Jake Raven travels with the show, hawking the Indian panacea that effected his own recovery. The show is actually a subtle piece of propaganda subsidized by the Bolshevik-IJB conspiracy. The man in the Chesterfield overcoat is secretly supervising its operations.

The narrator shares the common American suspicion that reform organizations, whether the labor unions or the NAACP, are subversive. As I noted earlier, he is also wary of poets. He incorporates an argumentum ad hominem into a new attack on Sylvanus Snodgrasse:

Snodgrasse had become one of their agents because of his inability to sell his "poems." Like many another "poet," he blamed his literary failure on the American public instead of on his own lack of talent, and his desire for revolution was really a desire for revenge. Furthermore, having lost faith in himself, he thought it his duty to undermine the nation's faith in itself (p. 238).

In this case, it seems absolutely necessary to interpret the remarks as solely emanating from the philistine prejudices of the narrator. West, of course, is never above taking a crack at literary types, but in this case the prime target would be himself. There is no evidence to support the view that West ever lost faith in his own talent, in spite of his lack of success.

The Chamber of American Horrors explores the relationship between a nation's collective unconscious and its social conditions. In the Inanimate exhibit, Snodgrasse (and West) employs surrealist plastic conceptions to express the contrast between the age of art and the age of science:

The hall which led to the main room of the "inanimate" exhibit was lined with sculptures in plaster. Among the most striking of these was a Venus de Milo with a clock in her abdomen, a copy of Power's "Greek Slave" with elastic bandages on all her joints, a Hercules wearing a small, compact truss.

In the center of the principal salon was a gigantic hemorrhoid that was lit from within by electric lights. To give the effect of throbbing pain, these lights went on and off.

All was not medical, however. Along the walls were tables on which were displayed collections of objects whose distinction lay in the great skill with which their materials had been disguised.

Paper had been made to look like wood, wood like rubber, rubber like steel, steel like cheese, cheese like glass, and, finally, glass like paper.

Other tables carried instruments whose purposes were dual and sometimes triple or even sextuple. Among the most ingenious were pencil sharpeners that could be used as earpicks, can openers as hair brushes. Then, too, there was a large variety of objects whose real uses had been cleverly camouflaged. The visitor saw flower pots that were really victrolas, revolvers that held candy, candy that held collar buttons and so forth (p. 239).

Snodgrasse and Satinpenny agree that the gadget is the culture symbol of America. The Animate exhibit reviews the atrocities that follow upon such creative poverty. The Pageant of America or A Curse on Columbus "consisted of a series of short sketches in which Quakers were shown being branded, Indians brutalized and cheated, Negroes sold, children sweated to death" (p. 239). It is climaxed by a skit in which a stock broker persuades a grandmother with three small dependents to trade her Liberty Bonds for phoney Iguanian Gold Bonds. The man becomes a millionaire in spite of the stock market crash, and the last scene shows him treading upon the bodies of the grandmother and her family, dead in the gutter. The narrator, however, does not perceive the relationship between the Inanimate and Animate exhibits.

Mr. Whipple is indignant at the propaganda. He defends the free enterprise of the stock broker:

"In the first place," Mr. Whipple said, in reply to Lem's questions, "the grandmother didn't have to buy the bonds unless she wanted to. Secondly, the whole piece is made ridiculous by the fact that no one can die in the streets. The authorities won't stand for it" (p. 242).

Whipple adds to this the important distinction between good capitalists and bad capitalists. The gist of it is that American capitalists are creative while foreign capitalists are parasitical.

Shagpoke does not dare create a disturbance in the large Northern cities, teeming with immigrants and minority groups. When they reach a "really American town" in the deep South, he arranges for a town meeting. His speech to the townsfolk is a paradigm of inflammatory rhetoric. He appeals to the Southern self-image:

"I love the South. . . . I love her because her women are beautiful and chaste, her men brave and gallant, and her fields warm and fruitful" (p. 244).

He stirs their paranoiac fear of an invisible enemy:

There is an enemy in our midst, who, by boring from within, undermines our institutions and threatens our freedom. Neither hot lead nor cold steel are his weapons, but insidious propaganda. He strives to set brother against brother, those who have not against those who have (p. 245).

He plays upon their sexual and economic insecurity:

Your sweethearts and wives will become the common property of foreigners to maul and mouth at their leisure. Your shops will be torn from you and you will be driven from your farms. In return you will be thrown a stinking, slave's crust with Russian labels (p. 245).

He bolsters their pride by invoking legendary names:

Is the spirit of Jubal Early and Francis Marion then so dead that you can only crouch and howl like hound dogs? Have you forgotten Jefferson Davis? (p. 245).

At last he points the finger of accusation at Sylvanus Snodgrasse and trusts in the Southern tradition of mob action. Snodgrasse escapes, but Jake Raven's red hide gets him lynched. The confederate flag is run up as the mob searches for scapegoats:

The heads of Negroes were paraded on poles. A Jewish drummer was nailed to the door of his hotel room. The housekeeper of the local Catholic priest was raped (p. 246).

Meanwhile, certain citizens loot the stores and free their relatives from prison.

The next-to-last chapter dramatizes the abjectness of Lem's fall. He gratefully accepts a job with a vaudeville team who dismantle him onstage to the delight of the audience. After each round of repartee, both comedians beat Lem with rolled newspapers until they knock toupee, teeth and eye to the floor. For a finale they club him so hard with a huge mallet that his wooden leg flies into the audience.

But he retains his faith in the shibboleths of the American way of life. Shagpoke's fascism breaks out in the South and West and moves towards New York. A storm trooper calls on Lem to ask that he give an impromptu speech from the stage of the Bijou theatre the night of

the New York uprising. Lem humbly acquiesces in his patriotic duty. As he speaks his first profoundly simple sentence, he is shot dead by the man in the Chesterfield overcoat.

The last scene is a commemoration of Pitkin's birthday. In a final irony Lem has become the martyr of the fascist cause. A hundred thousand young Americans sing the Lemuel Pitkin Song:

"Who dares?"--this was L. Pitkin's cry,
As striding on the Bijou stage he came--
"Surge out with me in Shagpoke's name,
For him to live, for him to die!"
A million hands flung up reply,
A million voices answered, "I!"

Chorus

A million hearts for Pitkin, oh!
To do and die for Pitkin, oh!
To live and fight for Pitkin, oh!
Marching for Pitkin (p. 254).

Whipple reviews for the crowd the history of Lem's dismantling, but he does not hesitate to re-write those facts of the case that do not promote his cause. Thus, he attributes Lem's wounds to the "enemy." The young fascists hail Lem as "the American boy" (p. 255).

Lemuel Pitkin has died as he lived--stupidly. As C. Carroll Hollis points out, a "pitkin" is a vegetable.²⁰ Not only is the name descriptive of Lem's intellectual vitality, but it also adds humor to the Lemuel Pitkin Song,

20. C. Carroll Hollis, "Nathanael West and the 'Lonely Crowd,'" Thought, XXXIII (Spring 1958), 403.

with its insistent repetition of the name. Furthermore, Hollis notes that "Lemuel" recalls Lemuel Gulliver, hero of an earlier satire. Lem Pitkin, however, unlike both Gulliver and Candide, learns absolutely nothing from his dismantling.

William Bittner remarked of West,

He delves more deeply than Melville into the ingrained confidence game of American civilization, the ever-widening split between aspiration and actuality that keeps our public statements, from school days on, from corresponding with the way things are.²¹

This discrepancy between the American myth and the American actuality is certainly the major concern of A Cool Million. There are three types of minds to be found in the novel. Lem sees only the American myth. His faith in it is implicit. He has no sense of the practical means of surviving in a metropolitan jungle. He is destroyed. Others, such as Wellington Mape and Wu Fong, have discarded the myth. In many cases they are immigrants who have not been educated in the American way of life. They are opportunists who prey upon the deluded. Lastly, Shagpoke and, to a lesser extent, Betty represent the majority of Americans who believe in the myth and pay eloquent lip service to it but would not think of living by it. They are the double-thinkers. They have their cake and eat it

²¹. William Bittner, "Catching Up with Nathanael West," Nation, CLXXXIV (May 4, 1957), 394.

too. Employing the sophistry of optimism--irrelevant statistics, exceptional examples, spurious distinctions, scapegoats, platitudes, and a romanticized past--they maintain their national conceit in the face of hard facts. Because they see America as an Anglo-Saxon, middle-class entity, they have ready scapegoats in immigrants and minority religions. The gap between belief and knowledge has widened to the point of a national psychosis in West's novel.

Victor Comerchero has analyzed the multiple role of Whipple in the novel:

In summing up, there seem to be four basic factors at work in the National Revolutionary Party's rise to power: (1) The natural frustration of the American people--always there because of their belief that prosperity is the natural state of the "virtuous," because of their belief that success is a moral issue--has been intensified by economic forces that strongly indicate the contrary. (2) The vague "enemies" that always existed--International Capitalism and Communism--because they are now thought to affect the people directly, become scapegoats. (3) An incantatory jargon has become a generalized idiom; and Whipple uses it with stunning success. (4) Whipple believes in his own cause. As a result, his appeal is to both aspects of the people's schizoid personality--the idealistic and the aggressive; he thus allows them to express their total personality.²²

To this it should be added that Whipple, as former head of the state, is symbolic of that corruption of intellect and of the moral sense which has debilitated the body public.

22. Victor Comerchero, Nathanael West: The Tuning Fork, (Unpublished Ph. D dissertation: State University of Iowa, 1961), p. 163.

West has been criticized for choosing to tell the story in a prose so much inferior to that of Miss Lonely-hearts. But it seems to me that the use of this hopelessly flawed narrator is not only successful as parody, but has social significance as well. Isaac Rosenfield has stated that West is the only novelist who has given expression to "the secret inner life of the masses."²³ What is most significant is that this expression was achieved largely through an understanding of and a borrowing from mass culture:

He saw, as everybody has seen, the starvation latent in the popular media, but he stayed clear of the platitudes and condolences over the death of culture. He showed the death of everything with the walls tumbling down. The starvation is not only for good books and fine music; it is a starvation for all of life, for sexual fulfillment, for decent work, for pleasure and happiness and relief from the desolation that drives people insane.²⁴

West's achievement was, according to Rosenfield, "the nearest thing to a new art form ever to be derived from the materials of a mass culture."²⁵

The parody of A Cool Million, then, is more than parody. It is an attack on popular art as a major factor in the perpetuation of the American Myth. The narrator is

23. Isaac Rosenfield, "Faulkner and Contemporaries," Partisan Review, XIV (1950), 110.

24. Ibid., p. 111.

25. Ibid., p. 110.

stupid but his stupidity is poisonous. He does not even perceive the duality which is at the bottom of his own story. West implies that the narrator's hypocrisy is symptomatic of a blindness in the collective American mind, an inability or a refusal to see its own deficiencies. And there is moral as well as aesthetic guilt in this pandering to popular myths.

West's parody is thorough. He consistently makes use of clichés, euphemisms, stock epithets, unrealistic dialogue, clumsy understatement, melodramatic shifting of time and place, and author intrusions.²⁶ His plot is hopelessly complicated, although linear. Many of the situations--the mortgage foreclosure, the country boy among the city slickers, the mistaken arrest of Lem, the heroic rescue of the runaway carriage, the scientific boxer versus the big bully--are threadbare from every possible use. So too are the fate-worse-than-death predicaments in which Betty almost daily finds herself. In his narration of sexual incidents, the narrator proves to be both lewd and a prude. In his treatment of serious artistic expression, he shares the suspicion of the "professional writer," the purveyor of commercial wares.

26. See Comerchero, p. 139, for a discussion of some of these devices.

In A Cool Million, as in Balso Snell, West adopted unusual techniques in order to treat unusual materials. Of course, the surrealistic imagery and tragicomic characters of Miss Lonelyhearts are missing. But it is the attribute of a mature artist to adapt his tools to the job to be done. One can hardly conceive of A Cool Million as narrated by the fine stylist of Miss Lonelyhearts. Nevertheless, West did allow himself to show off his ingenuity in the creation of Shagpoke's speeches, Wu Fong's brothel, the Pike County Man's invective, Israel Satinpenny's philosophical warmongering, the vaudeville routine, and the Chamber of American Horrors. All of these transcend mere parody.

I have dealt with the influence of Voltaire, Spengler, and Valery. Josephine Herbst reveals that West was familiar with the satiric cartoons of George Grosz:

John Hermann had an autographed copy of George Grosz's Ecce Homo; he had known the artist in Germany. We opened the big volume flat on the table, poring over the grotesque comics of the violent Berlin world. We spoke of his Christ in a Gas Mask, which had been banned in Germany.²⁷

Cartoons such as "Sex Murder in the Ackerstrasse," "After It Was Over They Played Cards," "Fit for Active Service," and "After the Questioning," depict the aggressive brutality that West restricted to the German nationalist

²⁷. Josephine Herbst, "Nathanael West," Kenyon Review, XXIII (1961), 623.

mentality. Grosz dealt with a country in which the collective unconscious was embarrassingly apparent; West's country was still repressing the worst of its tendencies. The Irish-American policemen of A Cool Million wear expressions roughly similar to those of Grosz's storm troopers.

Miss Herbst has suggested a parallel between Bottom Dogs, As I Lay Dying, and A Cool Million. She states that all three books demonstrate that "non-communicating man is the most lost of the lost."²⁸ Such an agreement in theme may well be true, but the differences between the books seem to outweigh the similarities. In the same vein, one might suggest that Charley Chaplin's tramp served as a model for Lemuel Pitkin. But West never summons the slightest sympathy for Pitkin, whereas Chaplin's tramp demands compassion. C. Carroll Hollis is convinced that "unless S. J. Perelman asserts otherwise, he must be assumed responsible for the initial form, style, and tone of A Cool Million."²⁹ I see no reason for making this assumption. After all, West was involved with parody, satire, even dadaist nonsense, as early as Balso Snell. And he was personally interested in politics. W. H. Auden offers another parallel:

28. Ibid., p. 622.

29. Hollis, p. 402.

West comes very near to accepting the doctrine of the Marquis de Sade--there are many resemblances between A Cool Million and Justine--to believing, that is, that the creation is essentially evil and that goodness is contrary to its laws, but his moral sense revolted against Sade's logical conclusion that it was therefore a man's duty to be as evil as possible.³⁰

This makes a good deal of sense, and the tension between recognition of evil and desire for good may well account for the concentrate of hatred and frustration that one perceives beneath the calmly produced surface of A Cool Million.

But when all the possible influences and parallels are taken into account, the novel remains unique. The "secret inner life of the masses" has not been overtreated in literature and it has never been treated through the parody of popular culture. A Cool Million is a unified work of art but it is not an oversimplification. It is, like all West's novels, a positive statement of a thoroughly negative viewpoint. Voltaire produced, in Candide at least, no political platform. Instead he suggested that one cultivate his own garden. In A Cool Million West produced no political platform; in The Day of the Locust, he denied that one may even cultivate his garden in peace.

30. Auden, p. 244.

CHAPTER V

THE DAY OF THE PAINTER

The Day of the Locust, published in 1939, did not receive immediate acclaim, but it did have a nucleus of favorable critics right from the start, many of whom had awaited the coming of age of the author of Miss Lonelyhearts. By the time the New Directions edition appeared in 1950 with its important introduction by Richard Gehman, the book had earned an expanding audience and critical approval. William Carlos Williams was generous in his evaluation:

This is as brilliantly written a short novel as I have ever read, a most beautiful and tenderly conceived portrait of the eternal bitch. No man could wish for a better picture. If we're to know love as it unseats the intellect, this is its excuse. But the writing is what I most admire. As I grow older I waken more and more to the understanding that good writing is always rare and I am grateful for it when it appears. Nathanael West, I salute you in heaven! Had he gone on there would have unfolded, I think, the finest prose talent of our age.¹

The Day of the Locust is apt to be compared unfavorably with Miss Lonelyhearts because the structure of the latter is more readily apparent. But West's last novel is not formless; its form is modeled on the art of painting.

1. William Carlos Williams, "The Day of the Locust," Tomorrow, X (November, 1950), 58.

The first chapter opens with a vivid Westian tour de force, the marshalling of forces for a Hollywood re-creation of the battle of Waterloo:

An army of cavalry and foot was passing. It moved like a mob; its lines broken, as though fleeing from some terrible defeat. The dolmans of the hussars, the heavy shakos of the guards, Hanoverian light horse, with their flat leather caps and flowing red plumes, were all jumbled together in bobbing disorder. Behind the cavalry came the infantry, a wild sea of waving sabretaches, sloped muskets, crossed shoulder belts and swinging cartridge boxes. Tod recognized the scarlet infantry of England with their white shoulder pads, the black infantry of the Duke of Brunswick, the French grenadiers with their enormous white gaiters, the Scotch with bare knees under plaid skirts (p. 260).

This is another instance of West's passion for particularization, in this case facilitated by his study of military history. But the scene is not described simply to catch the reader's attention with verbal pyrotechnics, although it does provide an attractive opening. It is also an appropriate introduction to the context of the novel in which the masses, the "locusts," will surround the major characters like a mute chorus. Furthermore, the troop movement takes place outside the office of the set designer and aspiring painter, Tod Hackett, whose visual imagination is stimulated not only by such garish scenes as this, but by Hollywood in general. The story of the novel, in fact, is the attempt of the imagination--West's and Tod Hackett's--to come to terms with Hollywood as reality, as microcosm, and as illusion.

As the armies disappear behind a Mississippi steamboat, the narrator focuses on Ted Hackett. The painter is in a situation similar to West's own. He has been brought to the Coast by a talent scout who was impressed by some of Tod's drawings for an exhibit at the Yale School of Fine Arts. Thus, like West, he faces the dilemma of reconciling his creative work with his commercial labors. He provides an apologia for himself and, by implication, for West. Hollywood has given him a new vision and saved him from the academic imitation of a tradition alien to his own:

He would never again do a fat red barn, old stone wall or sturdy Nantucket fisherman. From the moment he had seen them, he had known that, despite his race, training, and heritage, neither Winslow Homer nor Thomas Ryder could be his masters and he turned to Goya and Daumier (p. 261).

West must have had Albert Pinkham Ryder in mind, perhaps confusing him with Thomas Eakins. At any rate, West's writing was never in the American grain, and A Cool Million specifically debunked that American pride in a rugged ancestry which toughens the work of Homer. But the passage does throw light on West's real antecedents, who were painters, not writers, and painters schooled in distortion, caricature, satire, and prophecy. Throughout the novel, West fashions a literary aesthetic in terms of Tod Hackett's principles, practice, and masters. And the form of The Day of the Locust can best be understood by

analogy to the evolution of Tod Hackett's masterpiece, "The Burning of Los Angeles."

Tod's second reason for valuing his move to Hollywood has even more personal relevance for West:

During his last year in art school, he had begun to think that he might give up painting completely. The pleasures he received from the problems of composition and color had decreased as his facility had increased and he had realized that he was going the way of all his classmates, toward illustration or mere handsomeness. When the Hollywood job had come along, he had grabbed it despite the arguments of his friends who were certain that he was selling out and would never paint again (p. 262).

West's novels do not, I am sure, strike many readers as conventional. But A Cool Million may very well have seemed to its author a step too close to typical parody and political satire. It is even more likely that West had been discouraged by his failures in the short story. He had reason to be. Only one of his stories was published, and that one, "Business Deal," was a brief comedy of the contract negotiations between a veteran scriptwriter and a stingy producer.² There are a couple of well-detailed descriptions in it, but the characters are stereotypes and the humor is predictable and shallow. The story was published in 1933.

West must have suffered certain self-accusations when he "sold out" to Hollywood. He must have realized

2. Nathanael West, "Business Deal," Americana, I (October, 1933), 14-15.

that to his literary friends Hollywood was a notorious writers' graveyard. Several years passed between A Cool Million and The Day of the Locust. In the course of his screenwriting career, West, like Tod Hackett, must have come to realize that fate had guided him to the perfect milieu for his bizarre talent. The Day of the Locust is a vindication of his instinct for material.

It is Victor Comerchero's thesis that "West did not create character, he merely donned masks."³ According to this view, West's protagonists, with the exception of Pitkin, are the product of introspection, rather than observation. West simply gave flesh and bones to his own mental states.⁴ This observation is illuminating, especially in the case of Tod Hackett. Tod, I think it is safe to assert, is the most autobiographical of West's protagonists. His situation as an artist and as an employee of Hollywood closely parallels West's own. He is, like West, a bachelor. On top of this, his physical appearance approximates West's:

If the scout had met Tod, he probably wouldn't have sent him to Hollywood to learn set and costume designing. His large, sprawling body, his slow blue eyes and sloppy grin made him seem completely without talent, almost doltish in fact (p. 260).

3. Victor Comerchero, "Nathanael West: The Tuning Fork," (unpublished Ph. D. dissertation; State University of Iowa: 1961), p. 21.

4. Ibid., p. 14.

In the first chapter of this study I have tried to show that West is best described as a man of many faces. He himself does not attempt to fathom the many facets of Tod's personality:

Yet, despite his appearance, he was really a very complicated young man with a whole set of personalities, one inside the other like a nest of Chinese boxes (p. 260).

Partly because he is the most fully autobiographical character in West's novels, Tod is also the most nearly "normal" person, the character whose eccentricities are least conspicuous. West takes care to show Tod making the ordinary decisions of a normal life:

On the sidewalk outside the studio he stood for a moment trying to decide whether to walk home or take a streetcar. He had been in Hollywood less than three months and still found it a very exciting place, but he was lazy and didn't like to walk. He decided to take the streetcar as far as Vine Street and walk the rest of the way (p. 260).

Tod represents a maturing of West's technique. Because the reader can identify with Tod, the novel achieves an intimacy, a personal relevance, that is not accessible to the earlier works. Miss Lonelyhearts and Shrike, for instance, are perfectly valid fictional creations, but one cannot identify with them. It is not a defect that a character must be understood as a literary symbol rather than as a projection of a self, but it involves a difference. And precisely because so many characters in The Day must be appreciated from the outside, it is

important that the book be given a third dimension by the relatively normal behavior of Tod Hackett.

Tod is a sensitive observer of his environment. He works continually to transform his impressions of Hollywood into ideas for his painting, "The Burning of Los Angeles." A major task is the classification of the types of people who inhabit the metropolis. One large group is composed of natives or those who have accepted without question Southern California culture:

As he walked along, he examined the evening crowd. A great many of the people wore sports clothes which were not really sports clothes. Their sweaters, knickers, slacks, blue flannel jackets with brass buttons were fancy dress. The fat lady in the yachting cap was going shopping, not boating; the man in the Norfolk jacket and Tyrolean hat was returning, not from a mountain, but an insurance office; and the girl in slacks and sneaks with a bandanna around her head had just left a switchboard, not a tennis court (p. 261).

These are the "masqueraders." The implication is that this Hollywood-inspired culture is an aping of other times and other places, a playing of roles by people who have neither an individual nor a collective identity.

Hollywood provides for these masqueraders an audience, the "starers":

Scattered among these masquerades were people of a different type. Their clothing was somber and badly cut, bought from mail-order houses. While the others moved rapidly, darting into stores and cocktail bars, they loitered on the corners or stood with their backs to the shop windows and stared at everyone who passed. When their stare was returned, their eyes filled with

hatred. At this time Tod knew very little about them except that they had come to California to die (p. 261).

For these people Hollywood has been a promise of something better than the life they have known; the dream has proven to be a dud. They are the volatile element in the population because they are most sensitive to the disparity between the image of Hollywood and the reality. These are the people that Tod has determined to paint. West called the first draft of this novel The Cheated. The plot was a good deal different from that of the final manuscript:

West's first thought when planning the novel was to base it on the true story of a California soldier of fortune who had been implicated in a locally-famous murder case. With this man as a model, he created a character of his own, a renegade who proposed to get rich by taking parties of sensation-starved, bored and hopeless Angelenos on private cruises. The book was to tell of the adventures of an oddly-assorted group who went on one of these trips: a family of Eskimos, a child actor and his mother, a dwarf bookie, a seven-foot Lesbian who had to shave every day, a broken-down vaudeville clown and his talentless daughter who aspired to screen stardom, a woman whose hobby was funeral arrangements, and a film writer who kept a life-sized rubber horse at the bottom of his swimming pool--the sort of people that, without exaggeration, one might encounter in front of Schwab's drug store in Hollywood on any given day.⁵

A number of these characters have survived the changes in plot. The "cheated" have survived as the "starers," who have come to California to die.

5. Richard B. Gehman, "Introduction" to The Day of the Locust (New York, 1950), pp. xx-xxi.

Climbing Pinyon Canyon, Tod betrays the mixture of fascination and repulsion that extends to Hollywood in general:

The edges of the trees burned with a pale violet light and their centers gradually turned from deep purple to black. The same violet piping, like a neon tube, outlined the tops of the ugly, hump-backed hills and they were almost beautiful (p. 262).

He quickly hardens himself against the sentimentality into which he has lapsed. Nature is sometimes beautiful but man's works are unforgivably comic:

But not even the soft wash of dusk could help the houses. Only dynamite would be of any use against the Mexican ranch houses, Samoan huts, Mediterranean villas, Egyptian and Japanese temples, Swiss chalets, Tudor cottages, and every possible combination of these styles that lined the slopes of the canyon (p. 262).

In other words, Hollywood is a microcosm of civilizations; it is the last stage in history, a museum of the past.

It has been often remarked that Miss Lonelyhearts has a structural perfection that The Day of the Locust lacks. West insinuates that he has simply matched form to material:

When he noticed that they were all of plaster, lath, and paper, he was charitable and blamed their shape on the materials used. Steel, stone and brick curb a builder's fancy a little, forcing him to distribute his stresses and weights and to keep his corners plumb, but plaster and paper know no law, not even that of gravity (p. 262).

New York, a city of granite and steel skyscrapers and of spans of bridges, depends on mathematical symmetry for its very existence. But Los Angeles is an uncontained mecca,

ecologically unstable, spreading towards the horizons. Thus Miss Lonelyhearts depends upon a balance of forces, e.g., Lonelyhearts versus Shrike and the healthy love for Betty versus the unhealthy love for Doyle. It is West's task to find a new form, asymmetrical, for Los Angeles, and he draws his inspiration from the painters of apocalyptic panoramas, Breughel and Hieronymus Bosch.

The first chapter closes as it begins with a detailed description. Tod reads the story of the city in its plastic forms:

On the corner of La Huerta Road was a miniature Rhine castle with tarpaper turrets pierced for archers. Next to it was a little highly colored shack with domes and minarets out of the Arabian Nights. Again he was charitable. Both houses were comic, but he didn't laugh. Their desire to startle was so eager and guileless.

It is hard to laugh at the need for beauty and romance, no matter how tasteless, even horrible, the results of that need are. But it is easy to sigh. Few things are sadder than the truly monstrous (p. 262).

Norman Pokhoretz has provided the best description of this wedding of satire and sadness in West's work:

This is one of the lessons that comedy teaches--neither to laugh at the need nor to be taken in by the results. It is also the animating principle of true sympathy, which is why West's "particular kind of joking" has so deep a kinship with the particular kind of compassion that is allied to intelligence and is therefore proof against the assaults of both sentimentality and cynicism.⁶

6. Norman Pokhoretz, "A Particular Kind of Joking," New Yorker, XXXIII (May 18, 1957), 153.

Tod's own dismal apartment house is symptomatic of Hollywood artificiality. A plain back, sides, and interior are concealed behind a romantic facade:

The house he lived in was a nondescript affair called the San Bernardino Arms. It was an oblong three stories high, the back and sides of which were of plain, unpainted stucco, broken by even rows of unadorned windows. The facade was the color of diluted mustard and its windows, all double, were framed by pink Moorish columns which supported turnip-shaped lintels (p. 263).

Although the novel is narrated in the third person, the practice throughout the book is to observe the action through Tod's consciousness and to employ the imagery appropriate to a painter. This is even true of those chapters in which Tod is not involved in the action.

The second chapter sketches the pugnacious dwarf and racetrack tout, Abe Kusich. Tod, the closest equivalent to a Good Samaritan in West's novels (Miss Lonelyhearts is ineffective and much less interested in others than in his own Christ-complex), has earned the dwarf's everlasting gratitude by rescuing him from the corridor of Tod's former hotel after the dwarf had been thrown out of a girlfriend's room. In return, Abe has found Tod a room in the San Bernardino Arms.

Tod, a costume designer as well as set designer, is intrigued by Abe's wardrobe. His clothing combines the pastoral fantasy of an Alpine sprite with the contemporaneity of a Damon Runyan hoodlum:

The little man's hat fixed almost everything. That year Tyrolean hats were being worn a great deal along Hollywood Boulevard and the dwarf's was a fine specimen. It was the proper magic green color and had a high, conical crown. There should have been a brass buckle on the front, but otherwise it was quite perfect.

The rest of his outfit didn't go well with the hat. Instead of shoes with long points and a leather apron, he wore a blue, double-breasted suit and a black shirt with a yellow tie. Instead of a crooked thorn stick, he carried a rolled copy of the Daily Running Horse (p. 266).

Abe vacillates between camaraderie and aggressiveness. He is inordinately sensitive to any real or imagined offense. His truculence is obviously a desperate defense; his physical deformity has rendered him exceptionally vulnerable to demoralization. At first, Tod shies away from the dwarf's instability; but he comes to recognize Abe's violence as both a defense and a primitive means of communication:

Tod was surprised to find that he /Abe/ was just as truculent as he had been the other night. Later, when he got to know him better, he discovered that Abe's pugnacity was often a joke. When he used it on his friends, they played with him like one does with a growling puppy, staving off his mad rushes and then baiting him to rush again (p. 269).

Abe is one of the "cripples" that people West's novels. W. H. Auden has attempted to explain the significance of these unfortunates:

All West's books contain cripples. . . . As used by West the cripple is, I believe, a symbolic projection of the state of wishful self-despair, the state of those who will not accept themselves in order to change themselves into what they would or should become, and

justify their refusal by thinking that being what they are is uniquely horrible and incurable.⁷

It is true that Abe does not accept what he is. But it is difficult to imagine what Auden would have the dwarf transform himself into. It seems to me that the reader admires Abe's obscurely Faustian battle with his destiny and that one never really pities Abe because he neither wants nor requires anyone's pity. It seems, furthermore, that Auden, in reading West's novels as "cautionary tales," misses the point that caution is of little use in West's world, in which there simply does not exist a good life that one may aspire to.

The second chapter also offers good examples of the way in which West treats Hollywood as reality. His descriptions of the depressing interiors of the two boarding houses evoke a familiar world. Abe Kusich's speech is both colorful and typical:

"No quiff can give Abe Kusich the fingeroo and get away with it," he said bitterly. "Not when I can get her leg broke for twenty bucks and I got twenty" (p. 266).

Tod's first reaction to Abe is a normal one. He does not immediately cultivate the friendship of this person who can obviously serve as a colorful subject for his painting. Instead, put off by Abe's neurotic changes of temperament, he tries to get rid of him. It is impossible

7. W. H. Auden, The Dyer's Hand and other essays (New York, 1963), p. 243.

to segregate the elements of fantasy from those of realism in The Day, but it is important to understand that both exist and merge.

Abe is neither a masquerader nor a starrer. He belongs to another group, related to the masqueraders but more important because the members exist as individuals:

Abe was an important figure in a set of lithographs called "The Dancers" on which Tod was working. He was one of the dancers. Faye Greener was another and her father, Harry, still another. They changed with each plate, but the group of uneasy people who formed their audience remained the same. They stood staring at the performers in just the way that they stared at the masqueraders on Vine Street. It was their stare that drove Abe and the others to spin crazily and leap into the air with twisted backs like hooked trout (p. 264).

This is a clue to West's method. He is doing a set of "prose lithographs" of Abe, Faye, Harry, and others. The structure of the book consists of the sketching of the various central figures and peripheral groups who will be combined in the last chapter into a unified, panoramic impression.

Tod is emotionally unsettled by his unrequited desire for Faye Greener. He has accepted a room in the dreary "San Berdoo" simply because she lives there. Faye herself is calculating, and she is incapable of spontaneous combustion:

He had nothing to offer her, neither money nor looks, and she could only love a handsome man and would only let a wealthy man love her. Tod was a "good-hearted man," and she liked

"good-hearted men," but only as friends. She wasn't hard-boiled. It was just that she put love on a special plane, where a man without money or looks couldn't move (p. 270).

Faye has, however, readily rewarded his affection with a publicity picture of herself in a Turkish harem costume. She is not a talented actress; in the harem part, she muffed her only line. But Tod is not interested in talent or intelligence. The eye of the painter deals in visual truths, in textures and dimensions:

She was a tall girl with wide, straight shoulders and long, swordlike legs. Her neck was long, too, and columnar. Her face was much fuller than the rest of her body would lead you to expect and much larger. It was a moon face, wide at the cheek bones and narrow at the chin and brow. She wore her "platinum" hair long, letting it fall almost to her shoulders in back, but kept away from her face and ears with a narrow blue ribbon that went under it and was tied on top of her head with a little bow (p. 270).

West substitutes for plot a technique of symbolic description and of isolated revelatory scenes. The novel does occupy a certain span of time, but the reader senses almost no forward motion and West goes backward to sketch a character's history almost as often as he goes forward.

In this case the publicity photo reveals Faye to be a veritable Venus fly-trap:

She was supposed to look drunk and she did, but not with alcohol. She lay stretched out on the divan with her arms and legs spread, as though welcoming a lover, and her lips were parted in a heavy, sullen smile. She was supposed to look inviting, but the invitation wasn't to pleasure (p. 271).

Earlier Tod had cited Daumier and Goya as his masters. The portrait of Abe might well have been the work of a twentieth-century Daumier. The photo of Faye, on the other hand, resembles the Maya. Tod, however, attributes to the female of the species a deadliness that exceeds Goya's conception:

Her invitation wasn't to pleasure but to struggle, hard and sharp, closer to murder than to love. If you threw yourself on her, it would be like throwing yourself from the parapet of a skyscraper. You would do it with a scream. You couldn't expect to rise again. Your teeth would be driven into your skull like nails into a pine board and your back would be broken. You wouldn't even have time to sweat or to close your eyes (p. 271).

Never has the Elizabethan conceit of the little death been illustrated with such vivid conviction. When West says that sex is a mortal battle, he means it. As in Miss Lonelyhearts, sadomasochism is not a sexual abnormality; it is synonymous with sex. The passage also illustrates a difference between the two books. The violent imagery would by no means be out of place in Miss Lonelyhearts. But in that book such descriptions are periodic; in The Day they are practically incessant. The action in Miss Lonelyhearts is dominant; The Day is a more reflective book. It is a painter's novel.

The next portrait is of Claude Estee, who was the narrator in part of one draft of the novel:⁸

8. Gehman, p. xxi.

Claude was a successful screen writer who lived in a big house that was an exact reproduction of the old Dupuy mansion near Biloxi, Mississippi. When Tod came up the walk between the boxwood hedges, he greeted him from the enormous, two-story porch by doing the impersonation that went with the Southern colonial architecture. He teetered back and forth on his heels like a Civil War colonel and made believe he had a large belly (p. 271).

Even a person of Claude's intelligence can be infected by the Hollywood role-playing. He has become a walking example of the disparity between image and reality:

He had no belly at all. He was a dried-up little man with the rubbed features and stooped shoulders of a postal clerk. The shiny mohair coat and nondescript trousers of that official would have become him, but he dressed, as always, elaborately (p. 271).

Claude's wife introduces Tod to a nymphomaniac tennis champion, Joan Schwartzen. She has a pretty, eighteen-year-old face, but her veined neck betrays her thirty-five years. She is loud and vulgar. Again, Tod does not cultivate her as an interesting subject, but tries to escape. She insists on his escorting her to a stag group where she hopes to hear some "smut." To her disappointment, the men are discussing the movie industry. Mrs. Schwartzen hurries Tod to the swimming pool, where she points out Claude's favorite exhibit:

The thing was a dead horse, or, rather, a life-size, realistic reproduction of one. Its legs stuck up stiff and straight and it had an enormous, distended belly. Its hammerhead lay twisted to one side and from its mouth, which was set in an agonized grin, hung a heavy, black tongue (p. 274).

Tod is no more fooled by the horse than he is by Mrs. Schwartz's youthful face or any of the other Hollywood facades. Mrs. Schwartz laments: "'You just won't let me cherish my illusions.'" (p. 275).

Tod breaks away, only to wander into the group of frustrated artists who are still trading cliches about the "industry":

"But how are you going to get rid of the illiterate mockies that run it? They've got a stranglehold on the industry. Maybe they're intellectual stumblebums, but they're good businessmen. Or at least they know how to go into receivership and come up with a gold watch in their teeth."

"They ought to put some of the millions they make back into the business again. Like Rockefeller does with his Foundation. People used to hate the Rockefellers, but now instead of hollering about their ill-gotten oil dough, everybody praises them for what the Foundation does. It's a swell stunt and pictures could do the same thing. Have a Cinema Foundation and make contributions to Science and Art. You know, give the racket a front" (p. 275).

Again the obsession with facades. The man wants the industry, like the San Bernardino Arms, to have a deceptive front.

Claude has sold out to the industry, but he has retained his critical humor. In Tod's words, "He was master of a comic rhetoric that permitted him to express his moral indignation and still keep his reputation for worldliness and wit" (p. 276). He is a first cousin to Shrike, improvising the same cynical monologues:

"Love is like a vending machine, eh? Not bad. You insert a coin and press the lever. There's some mechanical activity inside the bowels of the device. You receive a small sweet, frown at yourself in the dirty mirror, adjust your hat, take a firm grip on your umbrella and walk away, trying to look as though nothing had happened. It's good, but it's not for the pictures" (p. 276).

Tod enjoys these flights of verbal dexterity. He plays straight man and suggests that chasing a girl is like "carrying something a little too large to conceal in your pocket, like a briefcase or a small valise" (p. 276).

Claude's reply includes an indictment of those responsible for the lie that Hollywood has become:

I know, I know. It's always uncomfortable. First your right hand gets tired, then your left. You put the valise down and sit on it, but people are surprised and stop to stare at you, so you move on. You hide it behind a tree and hurry away, but someone finds it and runs after you to return it. It's a small valise when you leave home in the morning, cheap and with a bad handle, but by evening it's a trunk with brass corners and many foreign labels. I know. It's good, but it won't film. You've got to remember your audience. What about the barber in Purdue? He's been cutting hair all day and he's tired. He doesn't want to see some dope carrying a valise or fooling with a nickel machine. What the barber wants is amour and glamor" (pp. 276-277).

Back in 1934, West had reviewed Gene Fowler's biography of Mack Sennett for the New Republic. Claude's speech echoes that review, which was entitled "Soft Soap for the Barber":

And yet, maybe the men who make the pictures are not to blame. Perhaps we should blame the man for whom the pictures are made--"the barber in Peoria." As Fowler says, "The history of the

cinema indicates that a man will pay a dollar to get a dime's worth of entertainment, but will not part with a dime to get a dollar's worth of ideals"--or ideas. Fowler is right. Whenever somebody forgets to ask what "the barber in Peoria" will think, a great deal of money is lost.⁹

Sennett himself, it seems, was a case in point:

It is strange, but the movies are always trying to forget "the barber." Even Mack Sennett tried once to forget him. He lost several hundred thousand dollars, then took another look at the sign hanging on the wall of his scenario department. "Remember: The extent of intelligence of the average public mind is eleven years. Moving pictures should be made accordingly." Sennett never forgot again.¹⁰

When the barber in Peoria moves to California he becomes one of the starers. If he moves to New York, he is apt to correspond with Miss Lonelyhearts. The mass, the "locusts," are, in West's view, destructive by nature. They destroy themselves and they destroy better people than themselves. They demand illusions and then they demand that those illusions be translated into reality. When one civilization fails them they destroy it and start over again. It is not difficult to see why West's writing was viewed with suspicion by leftists. He perceives in the mass not the seeds of utopia, but the atoms of holocaust.

This is the only extended treatment in the book of the people that West worked with in Hollywood. Mrs.

9. Nathanael West, "Soft Soap for the Barber," New Republic, LXXXI (November, 1934), p. 23.

10. Ibid.

Schwartzzen and the men at the party are the vacuous stereotypes that are always on the periphery of West's novels. Claude is of a superior nature. The failure of his life is, if not tragic, at least regrettable. He is not autobiographical. West was neither a highly successful screenwriter nor a sold-out creative writer. Tod is his counterpart in the novel.

It is to West's credit that the chapter has the same detached tone as the rest of the novel. In the trite dialogue of the men and in Claude's ironic self-revelations, West comes quickly to the dilemma of contemporary popular culture. But the novel does not allow itself to become too involved with the movie industry itself, not nearly so involved as, for instance, The Last Tycoon. West is not insensitive to the personal tragedies of his colleagues, but he is concerned with the whole of Hollywood and, by inference, with the whole of Western civilization.

The principle of the facade is utilized at Mrs. Jennings' house of assignation, to which Claude invites Tod. In Claude's words: "She makes vice attractive by skillful packaging. Her dive's a triumph of industrial design" (p. 276). West was generous in his portraits of brothel-keepers. Mrs. Jennings, like Wu Fong, is imaginative, unsentimental, and efficient. Moreover, she is a woman of charm, taste, and refinement. Nevertheless,

although West is ambiguous towards the prostitution of women, he balks at the prostitution of culture. Mrs. Jennings employs her education as her girls apply rouge, as a facade:

All the most distinguished visitors considered it quite a lark to meet her. They were disappointed, however, when they discovered how refined she was. They wanted to talk about certain lively matters of universal interest, but she insisted on discussing Gertrude Stein and Juan Gris. No matter how hard the distinguished visitor tried, and some had been known to go to really great lengths, he could never find a flaw in her refinement or make a breach in her culture (p. 278).

The men attend a movie at the sporting house. The projection room is not as fantastic as Asa Goldstein would have had it, but the interior decorating is an adventure in pastels:

She led them into a small drawing room whose color scheme was violet, gray and rose. The Venetian blinds were rose, as was the ceiling, and the walls were a pale gray paper that had a tiny, widely spaced flower design in violet (p. 276).

The film, Le Predicament De Marie ou La Bonne Distrainte, is a typical bedroom farce. A maid becomes involved with all the members of the household where she is employed. West probably took a wry pleasure in showing off his skill at plotting for the barber. Of course, the irony of the chapter is that the group prefer to watch the teasing film while the real thing is so readily available. They are insiders who know the disparity between image and reality and have preferred the attractive lie.

Tod goes out for a breath of fresh air. Back in the parlor he discovers an unusual collection:

On his return, he peeked into the different rooms. In one of them, he found a large number of miniature dogs in a curio cabinet. There were glass pointers, silver beagles, porcelain schnauzers, stone dachshunds, aluminum bulldogs, onyx whippets, china bassets, wooden spaniels. Every recognized breed was represented and almost every material that could be sculptured, cast, or carved (p. 281).

The collection reinforces the concept of Hollywood as a microcosm containing all types of houses, all types of people, all types of carved dogs. It also confirms the impression that art has just about exhausted itself.

Tod briefly nourishes the hope that Faye is employed by Mrs. Jennings. He does not despise the notion of buying her love, although he would prefer to win her. But she is not so employed. Tod begins to spend time with her sick father, Harry Greener, in the hope of becoming closer to her.

Harry is one of Tod's "dancers," a born performer. West gives a hint of his peculiar use of such characters:

The old man was a clown and Tod had all the painter's usual love of clowns. But what was more important, he felt that his clownship was a clue to the people who stared (a painter's clue, that is--a clue in the form of a symbol), just as Faye's dreams were another (p. 282).

Harry's clowning is an equivalent to the cynicism of Shrike and Claude, the truculence of Abe, the calculation of Faye:

When Harry had first begun his stage career, he had probably restricted his clowning to the boards, but now he clowned continuously. It was his sole method of defense. Most people, he had discovered, won't go out of their way to punish a clown (p. 282).

Harry has a vast repertoire of jokes. He completes his role by dressing with supreme incongruity in the cheap attire of an imitation banker. He has gone the usual role-players one better by making his falsity transparent: "His outfit fooled no one, but then he didn't intend it to fool anyone. His slyness was of a different sort" (p. 282).

Harry's vaudeville act followed the same pattern as Lemuel Pitkin's. He was a fall guy for the brutal slapstick of a family acrobatic troupe. His greatest reward was a superlative review in the Sunday Times, which he shows to Tod. The reviewer discerns the parallel between the act and one of the great traditions of comedy:

"The commedia del' arte is not dead, but lives on in Brooklyn, or was living there last week on the stage of the Oglethorpe Theatre in the person of one Harry Greener. . . ." (pp. 282-283).

The writer terms Harry a "bedraggled harlequin." This description is illuminating in relation to West's own work. One suddenly realizes that West has been trying to find the modern equivalent of the great comic tradition, which was never merely entertainment. He seems to have been on the right track. Miss Lonelyhearts, Abe, Harry,

and the rest do not seem out of place alongside Pagliacci, Rigoletto, and Shakespeare's fools. As Norman Podhoretz pointed out, West's particular type of humor is closely akin to compassion.

Harry has come to Hollywood hoping to survive on bit parts in the movies. He has taken to selling home-made silver polish to augment his meagre earnings. Occasionally Faye accompanies him, and it is in this capacity that she has attracted the attention of Homer Simpson. In the last half of the sixth chapter, Tod is introduced to Homer; the seventh to twelfth chapters constitute a history and portrait of the deuteragonist.

At first, Tod thinks that Homer is the perfect model for the type of person who comes to California to die, because he has "fever eyes and unruly hands" (p. 285). Later he decides that Homer is not the type because "the men he meant were not shy" (p. 285). However, when Tod once manages to engage him in conversation for a few minutes, Homer responds enthusiastically to the sympathy. The two become friendly rivals for Faye's attentions.

Tod Hackett does not participate in the next few chapters. There is, however, no change in the style of the narration. Homer's life is described as if Tod himself, as well as the narrator, were omniscient.

Homer has come to California from a small town near Des Moines to recuperate from pneumonia, a sickness

literally caused by his not knowing enough to come in out of the rain. West emphasizes Homer's passivity. He was easily replaced after twenty years with the same firm. He came to California because "the doctor had an authoritative manner" (p. 286). He rented his house in Pinyon Canyon "because he was tired and because the agent was a bully" (p. 286).

West takes a painter's interest in Homer's house. Once again, the house, like the man, is a grotesque. The exterior is "Irish," replete with thatched roof. The living room is ornately "Spanish." The bedrooms are "New England." One piece of bedroom furniture offers an ironic comment on Hollywood's mania for artificiality--"a Governor Winthrop dresser painted to look like unpainted pine" (p. 288). West had practiced for this assemblage of foreign decors with his outfitting of Wu Fong's "House of All Nations."

The next chapter takes up the man within the house. Homer is a difficult subject. Any painting of him is of necessity a still life, since he is only a little more active than the average artichoke. He is a zombie, one of the living dead:

He was afraid to stretch out and go to sleep. Not because he had had bad dreams, but because it was so hard for him to wake again. When he fell asleep, he was always afraid that he would never get up (p. 289).

Homer's only vital organs are his hands. These autonomous organisms dance a charade of frustration:

He got out of bed in sections, like a poorly made automaton, and carried his hands into the bathroom. He turned on the cold water. When the basin was full, he plunged his hands in up to the wrists. They lay quietly on the bottom like a pair of strange aquatic animals. When they were thoroughly chilled and began to crawl about, he lifted them out and hid them in a towel (p. 289).

The resemblance of Homer Simpson to the grotesque in Sherwood Anderson's story "Hands" has been observed by Daniel Aaron, among others.¹¹ Homer's manual activity seems to be a form of cryptic onanism, symbolic of his isolation. Furthermore, Homer represents man's tendency towards inertness, atrophy. Only after he is awakened by Faye Greener does he begin to demand a personal compassion. And, like all the figures, he is most important as a visual and affective symbol: "He was like one of Picasso's great sterile athletes, who brood hopelessly on pink sand, staring at veined marble waves" (p. 290). I have pointed out in an earlier chapter West's cubistic description of Miss Lonelyhearts. This analogy is not altogether abandoned in The Day, where Tod Hackett's personality is "like a nest of Chinese boxes" (p. 260). Added to this is West's affinity with Picasso's stylistic flexibility and catholicity. The

11. Daniel Aaron, "Waiting for the Apocalypse," Hudson Review, III (Winter 1951), p. 636.

novel is almost literally "painted," but it is in the manner of a number of masters.

Before coming to California, Homer had only once in his lifetime come alive. On that occasion he was required to evict a drunken girl from her hotel room. His behavior proved that his stagnation was the result of massive sexual repression or frustration. He was terrified of entering the room, but once inside he fell upon the woman with mute passion. When a telephone call destroyed the spell, Homer fled. The next day he tried desperately to find her, but she had left town.

At first thought, the suggestion that Homer might be in any sense autobiographical seems ridiculous. It is not common for an author to cast himself as such an unsympathetic grotesque. Nevertheless, West's ironic nickname "Pep" seems to have epitomized for his friends a certain laziness. There is also the circumstance of West's hotel experience, although I am not suggesting that Homer's adventure with the alcoholic Romela Martin is autobiographical. It seems more likely West thought of Homer as Gilson thought of the chauffeur, as a shadow personality in conflict with his more desirable self. After all, Tod and Homer are by no means opposites. Both are sexually frustrated, neither is handsome, and neither is an extrovert. The difference is in their hands and eyes. Homer's eyes are blank and feverish; his hands are

monsters. Tod is blessed with the intelligent eye and articulate hands of the painter.

Homer's emotions are always threatening to break into the open, but they never do:

He felt even more stupid and washed out than usual. It was always like that. His emotions surged up in an enormous wave, curving and rearing, higher and higher, until it seemed as though the wave must carry everything before it. But the crash never came. Something always happened at the very top of the crest and the wave collapsed to run back like water down a drain, leaving, at the most, only the refuse of feeling (p. 294).

This description of Homer's contained emotions is decidedly erotic, suggestive of a spiritual and physical impotence.

In the ninth chapter, West shows the extent of Homer's isolation and the fears that result from that isolation. Because he is afraid of the dark, Homer darts between light poles on his way to the grocery store. Furthermore, he is easily bullied by a beggar into emptying his pockets of coins. In the market he basks in the illumination. Outside, he hails a taxi rather than brave the dark hill.

West continues to reveal manifestations of Homer's negative personality in the thirteenth chapter. Homer has gone beyond boredom in the way that greater men have gone beyond good and evil:

Although Homer had nothing to do but prepare his scanty meals, he was not bored. Except for the Romola Martin incident and perhaps one or two other widely spaced events, the forty years of his life had been entirely without variety or excitement. As a bookkeeper, he had worked mechanically, totaling figures and making entries with the same impersonal detachment that he now opened cans of soup and made his bed (p. 296).

With this description, the reader begins to realize that Homer is not an atypical character after all. The labor that has slanted his brow has done the same to millions of uninspired workers.

Homer's hands continue to live their own life:

One day, while opening a can of salmon for lunch, his thumb received a nasty cut. Although the wound must have hurt, the calm, slightly querulous expression he usually wore did not change. The wounded hand writhed about on the kitchen table until it was carried to the sink by its mate and bathed tenderly in hot water (p. 297).

This is the first hint that Homer's manual activity may be an image of self love, or, at least, a surrogate for normal love. Homer's hands seem to have the love life that Homer has missed.

Homer enjoys vegetating in the sun, but he does not bother to turn his chair away from the garage and towards the canyon view. West finds in a prickly pear cactus a natural parallel for Homer's insensitivity to all but the most fundamental sensations such as warmth. Homer, however, does have one interest. He watches the battle of wits between a lizard and the flies, although he

maintains a rigid non-intervention. West makes a nice distinction between Homer (Mankind?) and the plant kingdom:

Between the sun, the lizard and the house, he was fairly well occupied. But whether he was happy or not it is hard to say. Probably he was neither, just as a plant is neither. He had memories to disturb him and a plant hasn't, but after the first bad night his memories were quiet (p. 298).

In Chapter Eleven, West brings the three major dancers on stage at the same time. Harry has come to Homer's house peddling his silver polish. He feigns exhaustion and thirst to get inside Homer's door. Once inside, however, the ruse backfires. Harry has cowed Homer into buying two unneeded, overpriced cans of polish and he cannot resist crowning his triumph with his "victim's laugh." It gets the better of him:

He was really sick. The last block that held him poised over the runway of self-pity had been knocked away and he was sliding down the chute, gaining momentum all the time. He jumped to his feet and began doing Harry Greener, poor Harry, honest Harry, well-meaning, humble, deserving, a good husband, a model father, a faithful Christian, a loyal friend (p. 300).

The mechanism is the same that precipitated Lonelyhearts' demise. The actor is no longer the master of his roles. He has been possessed by his own creation; he no longer has an identity to call his own. In his fit, Harry automatically runs through his series of roles, searching for himself:

Suddenly, like a mechanical toy that had been overwound, something snapped inside of him and he began to spin through his entire repertoire. The

effort was purely muscular, like the dance of a paralytic. He jiggled, juggled his hat, made believe he had been kicked, tripped, and shook hands with himself. He went through it all in one dizzy spasm, then reeled to the couch and collapsed (p. 301).

The disintegration of Harry's personality coincides with a heart attack. Little by little, he is forced to acknowledge that his faintness and chest pains are not part of the act. He collapses on the sofa and Homer summons Faye from the car.

It is love at first sight for Homer. Instinctively, he senses that Faye, in spite of her rudeness and vulgarity, is the antithesis of his own inertness:

He thought her extremely beautiful, but what affected him still more was her vitality. She was taut and vibrant. She was as shiny as a new spoon (p. 304).

Harry's pain inspires a moment of sobriety. Like Shrike, Harry removes his mask just once and renders himself vulnerable:

He examined the tragic expression that she had assumed and didn't like it. In a serious moment like this, her ham sorrow was insulting.

"Speak to me, Daddy," she begged.

She was baiting him without being aware of it.

"What the hell is this," he snarled, "a Tom show?" (p. 306).

The shrill spontaneity of the outburst catapults both Harry and Faye into a crisis of role-playing. Harry goes into hysterical laughter and Faye tries to exorcize him with a bumping and grinding rendition of "Jeepers Creepers."

The counterpointing of stylized, self-revealing responses is the same device employed in Lonelyhearts outside the door to Mary Shrike's apartment. This time, Harry seems about to prevail with a laugh that is the culmination of his life and, perhaps, an expression of West's comedy of despair:

This new laugh was not critical; it was horrible. When she was a child, he used to punish her with it. It was his masterpiece. There was a director who always called on him to give it when he was shooting a scene in an insane asylum or a haunted castle.

It began with a sharp, metallic crackle, like breaking sticks, then gradually fell away again to an obscene chuckle. After a slight pause, it climbed until it was the nicker of a horse, then still higher to become a machinelike screech (p. 307).

Faye finally puts an end to the bedlam by hitting Harry.

Homer comforts Faye in the kitchen. One gesture is especially revealing. When Veronica dried Christ's face with her cloth, a beautiful impression remained. Homer offers Faye a linen napkin to dry her tears. She stains it with rouge and mascara. Always the facade, rather than the face.

Faye monopolizes the conversation with talk of her ambitions. Like a good American, she is confident of success because, "It's the only thing in the whole world that I want" (p. 309). Homer cannot listen to her; her attraction is purely visual. Once again, his hands betray infallible signs of his repressed eroticism:

His hands began to bother him. He rubbed them against the edge of the table to relieve their itch, but it only stimulated them. When he clasped them behind his back, the strain became intolerable. They were hot and swollen. Using the dishes as an excuse, he held them under the cold water tap of the sink (p. 310).

When Harry recovers, he falls back into impertinence and opportunism, but Faye hustles him out the door.

The scene is as exhausting as a critical scene from Dostoevsky. There is the same involuntary self-revelation and the same clash of violent personalities. Moreover, West utilizes the negative dialectic that was so prominent in Balso Snell. Faye and Harry have sold their souls for counterfeit personalities. Homer has a definite identity, but it is closer to the cactus than to the gods. Man, therefore, is the loser whether he tries to be himself or to be someone else.

Homer's reaction to Faye is curious. Wilhelm Stekel defines onanism as "every sexual act carried out without the cooperation of another person."¹² When Faye has left, Homer's hands again behave onanistically:

His hands kept his thoughts busy. They trembled and jerked, as though troubled by dreams. To hold them still, he clasped them together. Their fingers twined like a tangle of thighs in miniature. He snatched them apart and sat on them (p. 313).

12. Wilhelm Stekel, Auto-Erotism: A Psychiatric Study of Onanism and Neurosis (New York, 1950), p. 31.

Homer is not the only character who is basically alone in his sexuality, which becomes obvious as the novel progresses.

Like Lonelyhearts, Homer is afraid of his sexuality:

He somehow knew that his only defense was chastity, that it served him, like the shell of a tortoise, as both spine and armor. He couldn't shed it even in thought. If he did, he would be destroyed (p. 313).

Lonelyhearts' self-destructive complex was triggered by Fay Doyle; now Homer's doom has been sealed by his infatuation with Faye Greener. Both men tried to confine a confused and volatile sexuality that could not express itself by normal means:

He was right. There are men who can lust with parts of themselves. Only their brain or their hearts burn and then not completely. There are others, still more fortunate, who are like the filaments of an incandescents lamp. They burn fiercely, yet nothing is destroyed. But in Homer's case it would be like dropping a spark into a barn full of hay. He had escaped in the Romola Martin incident, but he wouldn't escape again. Then, for one thing, he had had his job in the hotel, a daily all-day task that protected him by tiring him, but now he had nothing (p. 314).

Also like Lonelyhearts, Homer indulges in masochism:

But he couldn't let well enough alone. He was impatient and began to prod at his sadness, hoping to make it acute and so still more pleasant. He had been getting pamphlets in the mail from a travel bureau and he thought of the trips he would never take. Mexico was only a few hundred miles away. Boats left daily for Hawaii (p. 315).

West completes his portrait of this grotesque by defining Homer's anguish as a fundamental response to life, not a temporary neurosis:

Only those who still have hope can benefit from tears. When they finish, they feel better. But to those without hope, like Homer, whose anguish is basic and permanent, no good comes from crying. Nothing changes for them. They usually know this, but still can't help crying (p. 315).

Two days later, Homer makes his first visit to the Greeners, the occasion on which he meets Tod. Tod now re-enters the narrative and supplements Homer's impressions of Faye with his own. One comment reveals the way in which West's understanding of humanity breeds both satire and compassion:

Faye's affectations, however, were so completely artificial that he found them charming.

Being with her was like being backstage during an amateurish, ridiculous play. From in front, the stupid lines and grotesque situations would have made him squirm with annoyance, but because he saw the perspiring stagehands and the wires that held up the tawdry summerhouse with its tangle of paper flowers, he accepted everything and was anxious for it to succeed (p. 316).

One of the greatest ironies of the book is that even Faye, who drives men wild with desire and who, although selective, is certainly not chaste, is herself onanistic. She has evolved an elaborate system of daydreaming, by which she mentally thumbs through a catalogue of favorite dreams until she finds the one to suit that day's needs. From

this file and under the pretense of supplying Tod with material for scripts, she selects two examples. In a South Seas fantasy, she is rescued by a virile sailor who saves her from a giant snake. The second is a chorus-girl success story. Her sexual frustrations have been partially sublimated into her obsession with stardom. Of such daydreaming, Stekel states:

The paraphiliac identifies himself with his object; he feels himself into it so that he can experience both conditions: triumph and defeat, power and subjection, activity and passivity, male and female, resistance and the overcoming of it. The specific scene which he is always wanting to repeat is a drama, a fiction, in which he as the author feels with the actors, suffers and enjoys. This fiction has as its purpose to withdraw him from the real world. All these paraphiliacs are dreamers and have to force themselves to the daily duties of life. As dreamers they live in the past, although apparently their striving is towards the future.¹³

Tod is also onanistic. Like Lonelyhearts and the men in Deleahanty's, he dreams of rape:

He expressed some of his desire by a grunt. If he only had the courage to throw himself on her. Nothing less violent than rape would do (p. 320).

Thus, in this inversion of the eternal triangle, Homer, Faye, and Tod all exercise their sexuality in the imagination or, in Homer's case, in pantomime.

13. Stekel, Sadism and Masochism: The Psychology of Hatred and Cruelty, I, trans. by Louise Brink (New York, 1939), 56.

West perceives the relationship between these fantasies and fiction. Faye's technique is roughly similar to his own:

Although the events she described were miraculous, her description of them was realistic. The effect was similar to that obtained by the artists of the Middle Ages, who, when doing a subject like the raising of Lazarus from the dead or Christ walking on water, were careful to keep all the details intensely realistic. She, like them, seemed to think that fantasy could be made plausible by a humdrum technique (p. 320).

West's technique is more complicated. He does implement his fantastic creations with descriptions of everyday realities and he does maintain an overall realistic tone. But he also carries his imagery to extremes, making hyperbole credible by employing it so freely.

Tod contemplates Faye's place in the scheme of his painting. She does not seem to connect her own suffering with the suffering she inflicts:

In "The Burning of Los Angeles" Faye is the naked girl in the left foreground being chased by the group of men and women who have separated from the main body of the mob. One of the women is about to hurl a rock at her to bring her down. She is running with her eyes closed and a strange half-smile on her lips. Despite the dreamy repose of her face, her body is straining to hurl her along at top speed. The only explanation for this contrast is that she is enjoying the release that wild flight gives in much the same way that a game bird must when, after hiding for several tense minutes, it bursts from cover in complete, unthinking panic (p. 321).

Having completed his preliminary studies of the dancers, West introduces, in Chapter Fourteen, some

peripheral but no less original figures. Where Homer and Tod fail with Faye, Earle Shoop succeeds. This horse-opera cowboy cannot offer her money or advancement, but he meets her other requirement by being "criminally handsome." Tod and West readily admit that flat characters are necessary for the less important positions in their panorama:

He had a two-dimensional face that a talented child might have drawn with a ruler and a compass. His chin was perfectly round and his eyes, which were wide apart, were also round. His thin mouth ran at right angles to his straight, perpendicular nose. His reddish tan complexion was the same color from hairline to throat, as though washed in by an expert, and it completed his resemblance to a mechanical drawing (p. 323).

Earle, though not deep, is both violent and passionate. He kicks a cowboy who teases him. When he kisses Faye, Tod turns his back.

Tod, Earle, Faye, and Miguel, a breeder of game cocks, have a chicken and tequila picnic in the canyon. Under the influence of liquor and desert atmosphere Mig and Faye brave Earle's smoldering jealousy by open flirting. They dance erotically around the campfire. When Earle tries to intrude on their ritual, he can only manage a comic hoedown. In his frustration, he clubs the Mexican with a stick. Tod pursues Faye up the mountain with violent intentions of his own. When he trips among the wild plants, he lies peacefully intoxicated by the music of nature. His thoughts turn once more to his masterpiece:

He was going to show the city burning at high noon, so that the flames would have to compete with the desert sun and thereby appear less fearful, more like bright flags flying from roofs and windows than a terrible holocaust. He wanted the city to have quite a gala air as it burned, to appear almost gay. And the people who set it on fire would be a holiday crowd (p. 334).

In other words, the artist always finds a beauty in phenomena, even when dealing with the sordid or with destruction. Even the horror of "Guernica" has an attendant visual beauty:

. . . he only wondered if he weren't exaggerating the importance of the people who come to California to die. Maybe they weren't really desperate enough to set a single city on fire, let alone the whole country. Maybe they were only the pick of America's madmen and not at all typical of the rest of the land (p. 335).

Tod's justification is valid. He is a worker in symbols. There is a difference between prophesy and mere prediction:

He told himself that it didn't make any difference because he was an artist not a prophet. His work would not be judged by the accuracy with which it foretold a future event but by its merit as painting. Nevertheless, he refused to give up the role of Jeremiah. He changed "pick of America's madmen" to "cream" and felt almost certain that the milk from which it had been skimmed was just as rich in violence. The Angelenos would be first, but their comrades all over the country would follow. There would be civil war (p. 335).

All art is synecdoche, but especially the concentrated, infrequent work of Tod and West. Furthermore, West is correct in his assertion that the immediate cause of a

work makes much less difference to posterity than to its creator. The classic example of this is Gulliver's Travels. Written largely for political reasons, the satire on human nature is appreciated today even by those who have little interest in the politics of Swift's day. Similarly, West's work will be judged on its merits as fiction rather than as historical prediction.

Tod takes to sitting at Harry's sickbed and listening to his stories. One night he notices the shape of Harry's head. It is all facade:

He also noticed that Harry, like many actors, had very little back or top to his head. It was almost all face, like a mask, with deep furrows between the eyes, across the forehead and on either side of the nose and mouth, plowed there by years of broad grinning and heavy frowning. Because of them, he would never express anything either subtly or exactly. They wouldn't permit degrees of feeling, only the furthest degree (p. 336).

Tod decides that Harry does suffer as much as people who are not actors and that he is not enjoying his sickness. He does, however, enjoy that suffering which is self-inflicted. Like Homer, he tortures himself with reflections on the failure of his life. He even has a barroom routine in which he spills forth the melodramatic story of his blighted ambitions and ideals. The irony is that there is probably a nucleus of truth to the story. Tod may despise self-pity, but he must admit that such pity is not without a cause.

The next afternoon Harry dies, unmelodramatically, insignificantly. Tod, well-schooled in the facades of human nature, watches Faye put herself through the therapeutic process of self-blame. The routine is an instinctive defense. West implies that when a person strongly accuses himself of something, others will acquit him of guilt.

The janitress, Mrs. Johnson, intrudes her assistance with the funeral arrangements. Funerals are her hobby, but she must protest that her only motive is charity. Thus do humans make a virtue of a psychological necessity. To pay for the funeral, Faye accepts work with Mrs. Jennings rather than let Tod subsidize her. This job, along with a new manner of talking tough, allows Faye to feel "worldly and realistic" (p. 343). It is consistent that a "performer" trust in her ability to change her personality by changing her tone of voice.

On one level, the funeral is satire in the manner of The Loved One. Mrs. Johnson bickers with the undertaker over the quality of the metal casket hangers. Harry is dressed to resemble "the interlocutor in a minstrel show" (p. 344). Tod, as jealous as a schoolboy over Faye's prostitution, confronts her with the dangers of venereal disease. Faye plays the role of mourning daughter with impeccably trite taste, sobbing audibly on cue, turning from the casket with eyes appropriately lowered. Mrs.

Johnson has to intimidate the scattered comforters into taking a last look at Harry.

In its mimicry of this most stylized of rituals, the scene perfects the satire of social artificiality which West practiced with much less refinement in Balso Snell. But Faye Greener is definitely related to Beagle Darwin, who could not decide which role was appropriate for mourning his mistress.

The four estates of Hollywood are in attendance at the funeral. The masqueraders are represented by the Gingos, a family of Eskimos who have adopted Hollywood. Harry and Faye are dancers; Harry, in fact, is the headliner on this bill. His audience is composed of the starers. These righteous buzzards of a moribund civilization occupy the back rows:

While not the torch-bearers themselves, they would run behind the fire and do a great deal of the shouting. They had come to see Harry buried, hoping for a dramatic incident of some sort, hoping at least for one of the mourners to be led weeping hysterically from the chapel. It seemed to Tod that they stared back at him with an expression of vicious, acrid boredom that trembled on the edge of violence. When they began to mutter among themselves, he half-turned and watched them out of the corner of his eyes (p. 347).

In A Cool Million, West showed that of such people is fascism conceived. But The Day of the Locust goes beyond political upheaval to personal despair and the annihilation of society.

Edmund Burke coined the phrase "the fourth estate" to refer to the press. In The Day, Tod Hackett represents a generalized fourth estate as reporter and commentator on his society. He hears in the Bach Chorale, "Come Redeemer, Our Saviour," the strains of an impatient violence that threatens to wait no longer for the Second Coming. He recognizes in the chorale that final acceptance of faith as its own raison d'etre that differentiates that world-view from his own. Tod cannot stem the tide; he escapes from the chapel.

West now views the Hollywood microcosm from a new but intrinsic viewpoint, that of its films. Tod sees his movie studio as a universal history and geography in miniature. Wandering through the studio, he observes an ocean liner, a sphinx, a desert, a Western saloon, a jungle, an Arab horseman, malamute dogs, Paris, a waterfall, a Greek temple, a zeppelin, a fort, Troy, a windmill, a dinosaur, and a Mayan temple. Thus, Hollywood contains the past. Because West has established the place as a microcosm, he may pass judgement not merely on a city but on all man's works and days.

Tod has begun to look to the seventeenth and eighteenth-century Italian painters, Salvator Rosa, Francesco Guardi, and Monsu Desiderio, "the painters of mystery and decay" (p. 352). James Light remarks that

these painters are surrealistic in tendency: the work of Rosa is intimately involved with destruction and pain; the work of Guardi and Desiderio is full of images of falsity similar to those on a movie lot.¹⁴

For Rosa, the studio has provided a Calabrian landscape:

There were partially demolished buildings and broken monuments, half-hidden by great tortured trees, whose exposed roots writhed dramatically in the arid ground, and by shrubs that carried, not flowers or berries, but armories of spikes, hooks and swords (p. 352).

Desiderio's painting "The Tower of Babel" reminds one of a studio preparing for a Cecil B. DeMille Bible epic. Beyond the artificiality is the insinuation that the grandeur of the truncated tower is infinitely purposeless. One marvels not so much at the completed base as at the absence of any ceiling to the sky. Francesco Guardi's The Ascent of a Balloon over the Canale della Guidecca in Venice is uncannily reminiscent of Around the World in Eighty Days:

For Guardi and Desiderio there were bridges which bridged nothing, sculpture in trees, palaces that seemed of marble until a whole stone portico began to flap in the light breeze. And there were figures as well. A hundred yards from where Tod was sitting a man in a derby hat leaned drowsily against the gilded poop of a Venetian barque and peeled an apple. Still farther on, a charwoman on a stepladder was scrubbing with soap and water the face of a Buddha thirty feet high (p. 353).

14. James Light, Nathanael West: An Interpretative Study (Evanston, 1961), p. 173.

Rosa, Guardi and Desiderio are not the artists of the Italian Golden Age. They are the decadents; like West, they paint a fantastic picture of real decay, cluttering their canvases with borrowings from the actual. West's picture of the movie lot suggests that life is once and for all a great surrealist joke, neither more nor less than a juxtaposition of artificial incongruities.

Coming upon the trash dump for sets and props, Tod thinks of yet another painting:

This was the final dumping ground. He thought of Janvier's "Sargasso Sea." Just as that imaginary body of water was a history of civilization in the form of a marine junkyard, the studio lot was one in the form of a dream dump. A Sargasso of the imagination! And the dump grew continually, for there wasn't a dream afloat somewhere which wouldn't sooner or later turn up on it, having first been made photographic by plaster, canvas, lath, and paint. Many boats sink and never reach the Sargasso, but no dream ever entirely disappears. Somewhere it troubles some unfortunate person and some day, when that person has been sufficiently troubled, it will be reproduced on the lot (p. 353).

Thus, West specifies the nature of this microcosm. The cinema has never aimed at individual creativity; it has catered to the myths of the public. Then where better than Hollywood to study the affective life of the masses? And, paradoxically, where better to observe the emptiness and deception of it all. Hollywood is like the anonymous subject of Pound's Portrait D'une Femme, also compared to the Sargasso:

These are your riches, your great store; and yet
 For all this sea-hoard of deciduous things,
 Strange woods half sodden, and new brighter stuff:
 In the slow float of different and deep,
 No! there is nothing! In the whole and all,
 Nothing that's quite your own.
 Yet this is you.

But to anyone of the least sensibility, the disparity between the old dreams and their reproductions is transparent, comic, and troubling. West's description of the filming of Waterloo is sustained burlesque. Tod recognizes the costumes which he has helped to design, but he has not read the scenario. The illusion of the battlefield is spoiled because the English position is still under construction. Tod passes a sign that reads, pretentiously, "'Waterloo'--A Charles H. Grotenstein Production." A young man is practicing the legendary dying "Vive l'Empereur!" West begins to describe the battle with full historicity, but destroys the illusion by following the retreat of the defeated legions to their dressing room. Napoleon and Wellington are aped by assistant directors. The battle is lost for the French when a man in a checked cap repeats Napoleon's classic mistake and orders a charge on the uncompleted Mont St. Jean. The battle, like all conflicts in West, ends in a draw with both sides the losers. The man in the checked cap is exiled.

Once again West's comedy has authority because he knows what he is writing about. He had first-hand

knowledge of movie studios and a diligent student's familiarity with military tactics. The burlesque is double-edged. History is discredited and the present is diminished in comparison with the lingering myth.

Homer and Faye have agreed upon a "business arrangement." Faye will live with and off Homer until she has achieved stardom, at which time she will reimburse her benefactor with six percent interest. The arrangement furnishes them with an idyllic interlude, similar to Lonelyhearts' Connecticut vacation. Homer waits on Faye hand and foot and she is kind to him. They live a quiet life.

One of Homer's neighbors is Maybelle Loomis. She has raised her little boy, Adore, to be a movie star and both their lives are dedicated by her to that aspiration. Mrs. Loomis still considers California heaven on earth. Her son has mastered a repertory of suggestive songs, complete with abdominal writhings. When his mother catches Adore making faces at Tod, she explains that he thinks he's the Frankenstein monster. Of course, he is a monster. Mrs. Loomis has deprived her son of a personality in order that he might conform to a celluloid image.

When Faye is not present, Tod is the critic of society; her nearness turns him to introspection. Although

his hands are the skilled instruments of his art, they, like Homer's, are also expressive of Tod's inner life:

She looked just born, everything moist and fresh, volatile and perfumed. Tod suddenly became very conscious of his dull, insensitive feet bound in dead skin and of his hands, sticky and thick, holding a heavy, rough hat (p. 364).

Tod is not a "dancer." He is too reflective. A true dancer, such as Faye, does not think, but merely performs.

Tod accompanies Homer and Faye to a movie. Sitting next to Faye, he squirms in discomfort. He suspects that he is not untainted by the weaknesses of those he satirizes. What Tod does not realize is that he is bound to his models by a general tropism for death and by sexual frustration in particular:

He began to wonder if he didn't suffer from the ingrained, morbid apathy he liked to draw in others. Maybe he could only be galvanized into sensibility and that was why he was chasing Faye (p. 365).

Unsettled by this thought, Tod takes a vacation from Faye and searches out some of the more extreme starers, the religious faddists. He visits the "Church of Christ, Physical," the "Church Invisible," the "Tabernacle of the Third Coming," the "Crusade Against Salt," and the "Temple Moderne." These bring to mind yet another painter:

As he watched these people writhe on the hard seats of their churches, he thought of how well Alessandro Magnasco would dramatize the contrast between their drained-out, feeble bodies and their wild, disordered minds. He would not satirize them as Hogarth or Daumier might, nor would he pity them. He would paint their fury with respect,

appreciating its awful, anarchic power and aware that they had it in them to destroy civilization (p. 366).

West's own attitude approximates Magnasco's. He no longer judges, since all effort is futile. Rather, he appreciates the spectacle of humanity as one might thrill to the orange flash of an atomic explosion before being scorched by the waves of heat. At the "Temple of the Third Coming," Tod watches an angry Jeremiah railing against modern decadence. Tod does not despise the man or his listeners because he knows that they are the potential destroyers of civilization. Indeed, like Spengler, he seems to expect that they will.

The party is over for Faye and Homer. Time breeds boredom, and boredom, for Faye who is not used to it, is conducive to persecution of Homer. Their relationship settles into sadomasochism. At a night club, Faye humiliates the teetotaling Homer in front of Tod. Tod feels for his rival, but he has problems of his own. Like Lonelyhearts in the cab with Mary Shrike, he asks Faye to sleep with him. He does not plead love or money; he simply begs for kindness. Faye pleads that she can't-- probably because sex is her only weapon and she can't devalue it with charity.

The nightclub provides another facade in the form of a female impersonator. The male transvestite is more natural in his female guise than in his male role. This

is artificiality to the second power. Animus and anima have become hopelessly confused.

To relieve her boredom, Faye has invited Earle and Mig to live at Homer's. Homer likes the young men but is bothered by their game cocks and especially by their one hen. In Homer's description, the hen becomes a horrible symbol of misogyny:

"You never saw such a disgusting thing, the way it squats and turns its head. The roosters have torn all the feathers off its neck and made its comb all bloody and it has scabby feet covered with warts and it cackles so nasty when they drop it into the pen" (p. 372).

The reader realizes that the hen is meant as a counterpart to Faye Greener. These men have projected their hatred of her onto the hen. Although the hen and the girl are as unlike as possible in appearance, they are similar in more fundamental respects. Both scavenge. Homer insists:

"I wouldn't touch that thing for all the money in the world. She's all over scabs and almost naked. She looks like a buzzard. She eats meat. I saw her one time eating some meat them Mexicans got out of the garbage can (p. 373).

One remembers from West's earlier description that Faye figuratively kills her lovers.

The mangy hen furnishes a thematic transition to the most famous of West's scenes, the cock fight. It is almost the only scene in The Day that approximates pure action. The rest of the book depends heavily on symbolic description and author comment, which is, because of its

interest, not a weakness but a strength. Chapter Twenty-One, however, dispenses with almost everything but drama.

Tod and Claude Estee have come to see a cock fight in Homer's garage. The advertised bouts matching the birds of Earle and Mig against those of a man from San Diego fail to materialize. Abe Kusich is in attendance and scarcely distinguishable from the game cocks. A momentary verbal skirmish develops between Abe and Earle but their antipathy is temporarily controlled. Claude, who has never seen a cock fight, buys one of Mig's chickens to pit against Mig's champion cock, Jujutala, just for the sake of seeing a match. Claude's bird is big but past his prime. Nevertheless, Abe insists on handling the bird for Claude. When he spots a hairline crack on the bird's beak, he thwarts Earle's hopes of taking Claude for a big bet. By adjusting the bird's spurs and stimulating him in various ways, Abe gives the underdog every chance of upsetting the champion. Although completely outclassed, the bird remains alive and dangerous until his beak breaks off. Then he is easily killed.

Josephine Herbst called this cock fight the one heroic battle in West's novels.¹⁵ This is not quite accurate since Abe's subsequent attack on Earle inside the house also has a heroic quality. But the importance of the

15. Josephine Herbst, "Nathanael West," Kenyon Review, XXIII (1961), 611.

scene should not be minimized as atypical. The cock fight is symbolic of human living and dying as well as being a colorful tour de force. Abe, for instance, takes the outcome as a personal defeat. It is the sort of scene that one might well find in Hemingway and we can infer from it a similar lesson in meeting one's fate. West could admire Abe and the losing cock. But since courage appears in only two chapters of West's fiction, it would seem that he found that virtue less frequent in life than Hemingway did and considered it less of a consolation. Courage, for West, is not the moral victory that Hemingway ascribed to. It was simply a better way of losing.

Of the realism of this chapter, Stanley Edgar Hyman has written,

When The Day of the Locust appeared, I recall thinking how masterfully West had invented the bloody sex-drenched details of the cockfight that leads up to the book's final party. Having since been to cockfights, I now know that every symbolic detail was realistically observed, and the object of my admiration in connection with the scene is no longer West's brilliance of invention but his brilliance of selection.¹⁶

This is probably the reason why the chapter leaves such an indelible impression. The scene is, as Hyman continues, an objet trouvé, a symbolic set piece lifted from real life. It serves West (as bullfights serve Hemingway) both as a fictional spice and as an example of ritualized

16. Stanley Edgar Hyman, Nathanael West (Minneapolis, 1962), p. 43.

violence, an opportunity to observe dying firsthand. It is, more importantly, a chance to observe losing. All of West's characters lose. They have all been handed a "cold deck," to use Abe's phrase, and the best they can hope for is to die with dignity. The victor, Jujutala, will himself be past his prime soon. The scene further dramatizes the sexual basis of conflicts and thus prepares for the human cock fight within the house.

Homer and Faye invite the others in for drinks. Faye performs ecstatically before the stares of the men, especially Claude, who, as a successful screenwriter, might be in a position to help her career. Her conversation is an object lesson in the genesis of an illusion:

She went on and on, telling him how careers are made in the movies and how she intended to make hers. It was all nonsense. She mixed bits of badly understood advice from the trade papers with other bits out of the fan magazines and compared these with the legends that surround the activities of screen stars and executives. Without any noticeable transition, possibilities became probabilities and wound up as inevitabilities. At first she occasionally stopped and waited for Claude to chorus a hearty agreement, but when she had a good start, all her questions were rhetorical and the stream of words rippled on without a break (p. 387).

Homer seeks out Tod, hoping for his sympathy. But Tod is annoyed by Homer's lack of restraint and advises him to emulate Abe's stoicism. Tod, like Lonelyhearts, has reached a state where the egotism of humanity is more significant to him than its suffering. Homer deserves what

he has gotten. Tod's lack of sympathy reaches its apex when he notices Homer's hands involved in an obsessive, almost superstitious tic:

His big hands left his lap, where they had been playing "here's the church and here's the steeple," and hid in his armpits. They remained there for a moment, then slid under his thighs. A moment later they were back in his lap. The right hand cracked the joints of the left, one by one, then the left did the same service for the right. They seemed easier for a moment, but not for long. They started "here's the church" again, going through the entire performance and ending with the joint manipulation as before. He started a third time, but catching Tod's eyes, he stopped and trapped his hands between his knees (p. 389).

Tod is himself suffering too much under Faye's influence to have any sympathy left for Homer. All the men in the house are under her sway. Faye has begun a ritualistic song and dance in the living room. When Homer calls Tod "Toddie" and takes his hand the scene begins to resemble that in the bar between Doyle and Lonelyhearts. Unlike Lonelyhearts, Tod tears free and scares Homer away by calling Faye a whore.

Meanwhile Faye is dancing sensually with Mig and then with Earle. Abe, already stimulated by the cock fight, tries to cut in on his lanky rival. The tableau is frankly Oedipal, with the infantile dwarf tugging at Earle's pants, bullying his way between the dancers, and finally kicking Earle in the shins. This precipitates a brawl in which Abe strikes with unsuspected ferocity and

puts Earle out of action by twisting his testicles. The defeat of the giant has the flavor of a comic David and Goliath tale. Abe, however, is subsequently dashed against the wall by Mig.

In the relative calm after the fight, Tod shows himself to be the victim of indecision. Faye steps out of her torn pajamas and heads for the bedroom. Tod is suffering with desire, but he takes one step towards her and hesitates. Faye leaves the room. It is the unreflective man, an Earle or a Mig, who wins Faye.

Not only has Tod proved his bond with the mass by staring at Faye, but he subsequently proves to be the victim of romantic love. The dwarf wants to find other girls, but Tod snaps, "The hell with that" (p. 395). He is incapable of seeking a realistic solution to his problem of unrequited love. Underneath West's bizarre and symbolic treatment of Hollywood's many aspects, one senses very strongly the personal tragedy of Tod Hackett.

Chapter Twenty-Four is a fine example of indirection. Tod finds Homer completely demoralized by the disappearance of Faye. Homer tells a farcical story of his finding Faye in bed with Mig and, subsequently, of Earle's discovering the same situation. After a fight between Earle and Mig, all three of Homer's guests have disappeared.

During Homer's recital, one is apt to lose touch with Tod's own feelings. But he is by far the more affected of the two men. Homer has insanity as an escape from his sufferings. He has, moreover, spent his whole life practicing various means of quieting his soul. And he is not above complaining to Tod. Tod, on the other hand, feels the loss of Faye no less keenly than Homer. He is, after all, a far more sensitive person than Homer. But Tod maintains a classic decorum in his suffering. He listens to Homer's tale of woe, tries to comfort him, and does not even complain of his severe hangover, let alone of his loss of Faye. Tod is on the verge of a crack-up, but it is not his personal sufferings which will push him over the brink. On the other hand, he is a classic study in the bravely lived, autonomous inner life. The study is all the more relevant because Tod is lifelike, not greater than life.

Homer falls asleep and his muscles and nerves begin to coil automatically like a spring. Tod has read about this phenomenon:

Original coil . . . In a book of abnormal psychology borrowed from the college library, he had once seen a picture of a woman sleeping in a net hammock whose posture was much like Homer's. "Uterine Flight," or something like that, had been the caption under the photograph. The woman had been sleeping in the hammock without changing her position, that of the foetus in the womb, for a great many years. The doctors of the insane asylum had been able to awaken her for only short periods of time and those months apart (p. 403).

Homer has become a symbol of sleeping humanity, safe from the ravages of life because of its regression towards prime matter. Of course, it is only in the abnormal instance that one is able to make this escape permanent. But the womb is a dream of mankind and Tod reflects that it is preferable to many escapes. The ones he mentions--the Religion of Art and the South Sea Islands--are among those debunked by Shrike. The womb is more essential:

It was so snug and warm there, and the feeding was automatic. Everything perfect in that hotel. No wonder the memory of those accommodations lingered in the blood and nerves of everyone. It was dark, yes, but what a warm, rich darkness. The grave wasn't in it. No wonder one fought so desperately against being evicted when the nine months' lease was up (pp. 403-404).

Tod looks for Earle at the Trading Post. Another cowboy, Calvin, and an Indian engage in an argument over Mexicans that demonstrates the genesis of popular myths:

The Indian said that they were all bad. Calvin claimed he had known quite a few good ones in his time. When the Indian cited the case of the Hermanos brothers who had killed a lonely prospector for half a dollar, Calvin countered with a long tale about a man called Tomas Lopez who shared his last pint of water with a stranger when they both were lost in the desert (p. 405).

Tod despairs of finding Faye through Earle. He goes to a restaurant for a steak and a Scotch. Faye still stimulates his imagination. He perceives the invulnerability of the eternal female:

Nothing could hurt her. She was like a cork. No matter how rough the sea got, she would go dancing over the same waves that sank iron ships

and tore away piers of reinforced concrete. He pictured her riding a tremendous sea. Wave after wave reared its ton on ton of solid water and crashed down only to have her spin gaily away.

Ironically, this Hamlet who is hardly capable of begging a kiss from her once again casts himself in the role of rapist. He conjures up the scene in all its details. The fullness of his daydream shows the kinship between sexual fantasies and art. Unfortunately, the waiter interrupts his reverie, and he is unable to get it going again. He has, moreover, lost his appetite for the steak.

Tod wanders into a crowd gathered to watch the stars arrive for a premiere at Kahn's Persian Palace Theatre. The crowd, harmless as individuals, is dangerous as a mass. The police have all they can do to contain it. They also clamp down on a radio announcer whose audible histrionics threaten to incite a riot. All that keeps the crowd from actualizing its destructive capacity is the lack of purpose: "It allowed itself to be hustled and shoved out of habit and because it lacked an objective" (p. 410). It is not the proletariat who bear the torches of revolution in America:

Tod could see very few people who looked tough, nor could he see any working men. The crowd was made up of the lower middle classes, every other person one of his torchbearers (p. 411).

As long as he remains an individual, the crowd is hostile to him. But when he laughs along with them, they accept him.

Breaking free from the crowd, Tod is able to observe them. He notices the way in which their hidden personalities are externalized as soon as they join the crowd:

He could see a change come over them as soon as they had become a part of the crowd. Until they reached the line, they looked diffident, almost furtive, but the moment they had become part of it, they turned arrogant and pugnacious. It was a mistake to think them harmless curiosity seekers. They were savage and bitter, especially the middle-aged and the old, and had been made so by boredom and disappointment (p. 411).

In a long and justly famous passage, West examines the bi-polarity of apathy and violence that he sees as the secret to the inner life of the American middle class. These people have wasted their lives at trivial, uncreative labor. They have kept themselves going with the dream of a retirement in California. They are thus representative of all who work towards the pot at the end of the rainbow. In California they find that they have been deceived. No pleasure is permanent. The exotic fruits, the ocean, the airplanes--all the enticements of California quickly lose their appeal. There are no more dreams, no more vicarious excitements. Instinctively, they begin to create their own excitement:

Their boredom becomes more and more terrible. They realize that they've been tricked and burn with resentment. Every day of their lives they read the newspapers and went to the movies. Both fed them on lynchings, murder, sex crimes, explosions, wrecks, love nests, fires, miracles, revolutions, war. This daily diet made sophisticates of them. The sun is a joke. Oranges can't titillate their jaded palates. Nothing can ever be violent enough to make taut their slack minds and bodies. They have been cheated and betrayed. They have slaved and saved for nothing (p. 412).

They are indeed the cream of the middle-class sophisticates, but they are representative of all who have been overstimulated by the dream-fruits of the movies.

In the midst of the crowd, Tod discerns Homer, heading back to Wayneville with suitcase in hand and dressed in trousers over a nightgown. Tod realizes that Homer has really lost his sanity. Before he can get him to a cab, Homer gets away and sits on a bench under a tree. Tod cannot budge him. He decides to stand at a distance and wait for an opportunity or an idea.

Adore Loomis, the Frankenstein monster, is playing by the same tree. He tries to tease Homer with a purse on a string, but Homer is inattentive. He tries to taunt him with nasty faces. Finally he hits Homer square in the face with a stone. Before Tod can move, Homer is on top of the boy trampling him to death. This is the spark necessary to incite the crowd, to give it direction. Tod is swept away by the riot.

In the crowd Tod learns first hand how ignoble humanity can be. An old lecher is tearing the clothes from a young girl. A stout woman rubs against him. One clique discuss a pervert in such terms that it is obvious nothing perverse is really alien to them. Tod finds himself hurting others to increase his own comfort. At last he breaks free and slips automatically into contemplation of his picture "The Burning of Los Angeles," which he now has fully blocked out:

Across the top, parallel with the frame, he had drawn the burning city, a great bonfire of architectural styles, ranging from Egyptian to Cape Cod colonial. Through the center, winding from left to right, was a long hill street and down it, spilling into the middle foreground, came the mob carrying baseball bats and torches. For the faces of its members, he was using the innumerable sketches he had made of the people who come to California to die; the cultists of all sorts, economic as well as religious, the wave, airplane, funeral and preview watchers--all those poor devils who can only be stirred by the promise of miracles and then only to violence. A super "Dr. Know-All Pierce-All" had made the necessary promise and they were marching behind his banner in a great united front of screwballs and screwboxes to purify the land. No longer bored, they sang and danced joyously in the red light of the flames (pp. 419-420).

This painting is the culmination not only of Tod's work but of West's novel as well. He has built for the reader a Hollywood of strange architectures and of a vast staring mob. These have formed the landscape and mute chorus of his work. He has brought to life a handful of symbolic individuals:

In the lower foreground, men and women fled wildly before the vanguard of the crusading mob. Among them were Faye, Harry, Homer, Claude and himself. Faye ran proudly, throwing her knees high. Harry stumbled along behind her, holding on to his beloved derby hat with both hands. Homer seemed to be falling out of the canvas, his face half-asleep, his big hands clawing the air in anguished pantomime. Claude turned his head as he ran to thumb his nose at his pursuers. Tod himself picked up a small stone to throw before continuing his flight (p. 420).

Tod's small stone is his artistic gesture. It is not sufficient to save him. He has passed over into madness and thinks he is at home working on the painting. In a police car, he returns temporarily to sanity. But then, he begins to imitate the siren of the car. With Tod's madness, the novel is complete. Interestingly, Faulkner and West seem to have reached a similar intuition of the nature of human response. The Sound and the Fury and The Day of the Locust both end with the principal figure uttering not words but a simple sound.

The Day of the Locust has been appreciated, but it has not been fully appreciated. Louis B. Salomon's reaction typifies one common objection to the novel: "It needs . . . most of all, perhaps, a few ordinary, everyday people (of whom there must be a few even in Hollywood), to lend perspective."¹⁷ A. M. Tibbetts elaborates upon the same opinion:

17. Louis B. Salomon, "California Grotesque," Nation, CXLIX (July 15, 1939), 79.

The public will swallow a satirist's work if his world is complete and recognizable; West's was not. His world was cut in two and half of it was missing.

There is simply not enough in West's two best novels about recognizable people and recognizable situations.¹⁸

West anticipated this objection and defended himself against it:

If I put into The Day of the Locust any of the sincere, honest people who work here and are making such a great, progressive fight, those chapters couldn't be written satirically and the whole fabric of the peculiar half-world which I attempted to create would be badly torn by them . . . I believe there is a place for the person who yells fire and indicates where some of the smoke is coming from without actually dragging the hose to the spot.¹⁹

As usual, the author seems to have understood the exigencies of his craft and the nature of the work at hand better than the critics. "Ordinary people" would certainly have weakened the effect of the novel. The relative normality of Tod Hackett provides whatever perspective is needed.

An equally common objection is raised against the novel's alleged lack of focus. Stanley Edgar Hyman considers this lack of unity a very damaging flaw:

. . . I think that The Day of the Locust ultimately fails as a novel. Shifting from Tod to Homer and back to Tod, it has no dramatic unity, and in comparison with Miss Lonelyhearts, it has no moral core. Where Miss Lonelyhearts' inability to stay in Betty's Eden is heart-breaking, Tod's disillusion with Faye is only

18. A. M. Tibbetts, "The Strange Half-World of Nathanael West," Prairie Schooner, XXXIV (1960), 8.

19. Gehman, pp. ix-x.

sobering, and where the end of the former is tragic, the end of this, Tod in the police car screaming along with the siren, is merely hysteric.²⁰

A. M. Tibbetts, probably the most severe of West's critics, concurs in this indictment:

The shift in person is not very successful, and the point of view moves without apparent reason from Tod Hackett to Homer Simpson and back again. It is interesting to notice, by the way, that neither of the two main characters was the original narrator, which further complicates the point of view. West was, I think, not quite sure where to focus his material.²¹

I believe that I have demonstrated that there is no real shift of person in the novel. The chapters describing Homer alone are narrated in a manner perfectly consistent with the rest of the book. Indeed, the novel is assured of a singleness of viewpoint by its emanation from "the painter's eye." Tibbetts goes on, however, to affirm Hyman's corollary objection to the novel's "moral core." He complains that West was not a satirist because he did not indicate the standards of society which he considered good or bad: "One cannot infer what West's standard of human fulfillment truly is."²² This is simply tampering with definitions. Clearly, West considered life itself as not worth living. But it is also possible to discern

20. Hyman, p. 45.

21. Tibbetts, p. 12.

22. Ibid., p. 14.

his commendation of Abe and condemnation of Adore. The majority of the characters in The Day, like most people, have their good days and their bad days. West does not believe in human fulfillment on any great scale. But he does deal with nuances of behavior. And this is true of both of his best novels.

James Light attempts to analyze the influence of cinema techniques on the novel:

In writing for the screen West learned the cinematic advantages of writing in short scenes or 'shots.' These pictorially dramatized, often symbolized, a character or an event or an idea, and the screen technique, unlike that of the stage, made it possible to have numerous short scenes with swiftly changing settings. The use of this roving, panoramic technique in The Day effects extreme pictorialization, often highly symbolic, as well as numerous short chapters.²³

It seems to me that the cinematic aspects of the novel have been over-emphasized. Are not all of West's novels constructed out of highly pictorial, symbolic short chapters? Wells Root assesses West's career as a screen writer:

He was a competent screen writer . . . He could turn out a sound script in a reasonable time . . . He had none of the false pride that forces numerous writers to regard anything they have written as gospel the minute it has gone through mimeograph . . . I think he figured in respect to producers and directors that movies were their business, not his. He was a sort of architectural assistant working on plans for a house. The methods and materials were of their choosing; and they had to live in the house. In

23. Light, p. 175.

all probability . . . he would have progressed to A-bracket pictures, which are formidably budgeted, competently directed and acted . . . Had this happened, his attitude toward films might have been less detached. I'm not sure, and I don't think it's very important. Whatever happened to him in pictures, good or bad, up to the time of his death, had affected in no way his real work, which was writing novels.²⁴

West's detachment supports the idea that he possessed the talents necessary for success as a screenwriter, but that the job did not seriously modify his techniques. If anything, the work in the visual medium may have reinforced his idea of writing a novel from a painter's viewpoint. One critic, however, judges that "the worst fault of the book is that it follows the choppy, episodic technique of a movie scenario."²⁵ The novel is episodic, but the fully detailed scenes, sometimes deeply reflective, sometimes intensely dramatic, cannot be described as choppy.

The Day of the Locust does not have the symmetry nor the flawless plot of Miss Lonelyhearts. It is a different sort of book and its form derives from its three-fold purpose--to grasp Hollywood as a microcosm, as a symbol of artificiality, and as a real place. The structural principle is the process of composition of Tod Hackett's painting, "The Burning of Los Angeles." West,

24. Quoted in Gehman, pp. xx-xxi.

25. George Milburn, "The Hollywood Nobody Knows," Saturday Review of Literature, XX (May 20, 1939), 14.

like Tod, adopts a construction that is more spatial than temporal. He devotes chapters to the landscapes of Hollywood, to the masses, to the principal figures, and to the artist himself. Moreover, West implies his own aesthetic in the reflections of Tod Hackett. Tod's masters are also the masters of West's prose. Their painting and his prose may both be termed "surrealistic" in the widest sense.

West objected to Clifton Fadiman's naming him a Surrealist.²⁶ Richard Gehman, however, has shown West's affinity with that school:

. . . the paintings and writings of their official school affected him profoundly when he first came across them in Paris, and his feeling for their destructive derision, their preoccupation with decay and degeneracy and disintegration was indisputably empathic. . . . Like the Surrealists, West often used enormous incongruities to make his points, but unlike them, he preferred to distill his perceptions into images and situations that were painfully barren of minutiae. He was a master of Portmanteau: with a few active phrases, and the Flaubertian addition of a color-word, he constructed scenes that were not only miraculous in their descriptive accuracy but also by their unashamed intensity were so far above realism as to embarrass, or frighten, the reader into acknowledging, almost against his will, the shameful and terrifying reality of reality. This may have been one reason why he never reached a wide audience while he was alive.²⁷

Isaac Rosenfeld adds the observations that West's surreality is closely related to the surface reality which it both illumines and destroys:

26. Gehman, p. x.

27. Ibid.

Though West did not want to be considered a surrealist, it is a fairly accurate classification; there is the same compression of meaning in his images, often several layers thick, and the compression achieves for him a similar effect, incandescent and explosive. Now this is by no means an estrangement from the popular, the surrealists themselves having made extensive use of devices from popular culture. In West's use of his imagery, he straddles the two worlds of his sensibility, the poetic and the popular, and the grotesques who fill the work . . . are derived from this juxtaposition.²⁸

All of the painters mentioned in the book transformed surface realities for emotional effect and in order that the blind might see. But West's surrealism is only one example of the influence of painting on the book. The art of painting served for West as an inspiration to a new formal principle for fiction. He related all problems of technique and interpretation to painting, and the analogy served as a unifying principle and as a source of highly original effects. When one views the world of The Day through the painter's eye, many blocks to understanding and appreciation cease to exist.

Richard Gehman, very perceptive in his reading of this novel, notes that Hollywood served well as a microcosm,

because everything that is wrong with life in the United States is to be found there in rare purity, and because the unreality of the business

28. Isaac Rosenfeld, "Faulkner and Contemporaries," Partisan Review, XIV (1950), 110.

of making pictures seemed a most proper setting for his "half-world."²⁹

The microcosm can be extended to include all of Western civilization. I have pointed out the ways in which West catalogues echoes of other times and places which are found in Hollywood. The decay of Hollywood is prophetic of the decay of civilization:

What West discovered in Hollywood was only the advanced stage of a sickness which was spreading through the whole of contemporary society. And there was no cure in sight. It is impossible to extract hope from any of West's novels (his closest venture is the feeble Marxism of A Cool Million): all reflect a belief that history is discontinuous, that the present civilization can neither draw upon the past nor contribute to the future, and that with the impending collapse into a new barbarism, we are witnessing the end of the whole process. His plea for the Apocalypse includes no millenium; and there is ample reason for believing that West saw complete social collapse, not as a first act toward social reconstruction, but rather as a last act of mercy.³⁰

West, then, grasped Hollywood first of all as a historical microcosm, a closed system in which to observe the decline of the West. He grasped it secondly as a metaphysical symbol, a house of mirrors illuminating the eternal disparity between the appearance and the reality. To this end, he carried the motif of the Facade throughout the work, representing falsity in such various respects as

29. Gehman, p. xx.

30. V. L. Lokke, "A Side Glance at Medusa: Hollywood, the Literature Boys, and Nathanael West," Southwest Review, XLVI (1961), 45.

the front of the San Berdoo, the public relations of the movie industry, the dead horse, Harry's face, Mrs. Schwartz's, and, by extension, the changes of voice and the falsity of motives of Faye Greener. As a symbol of historical decay, Hollywood does not preclude hope of a better world. But as a symbol of metaphysical deception, Hollywood incarnates one of the great causes of West's pessimism.

But Hollywood is also a real city, a city inhabited by human beings, a city that West knew intimately. The characters of The Day are not so completely allegorical that they cease to exist as human beings. They represent a great variety of human types, but they have in common their suffering. This suffering is, in the novel, largely a matter of sexual frustration. Tod first meets Abe outside of a girlfriend's room. Claude frequents Mrs. Jennings' house and cynically mocks romance. Mrs. Schwartz has sex on the brain. Maybelle Loomis teaches her son suggestive songs. Earle and Mig fight over Faye. Homer is tormented first by the abortive affair in the hotel room and later by Faye. The descriptions of the hen and of the cock fight are sexually toned. Tod dreams of raping Faye. Faye herself dreams of romance. In general, these characters seek release from their frustrated sexuality in what might be called cryptic onanism--through imagination or compulsive mannerisms. This perception of

individual suffering is at least as important in West's work as are his social views. Josephine Herbst says,

The only valid currency is suffering. The paraphernalia of suffering surrounds the sufferers and streams from the air. . . . If there is a vision of love it is etched in the acid of what love is not. If there is courage it is no more than the persistence of human beings to endure in spite of it all.³¹

The Day of the Locust is the story of a painting, but it is also the story of the painter. Tod Hackett is West's portrait of the artist. His view is close to Wordsworth's. The artist has all the sufferings of ordinary men. In West's view, however, the artist also bears the burden of advanced knowledge, the knowledge of good and evil, the knowledge that leads to pessimism. It is this cosmic burden, rather than his personal troubles, that finally cracks Tod Hackett's sanity. In this respect the novel goes beyond those apocalyptic paintings to which it is often compared. For it adds to its interpretation of the external world a probing of the artist's subjectivity. The two stories coincide because chaos reigns within the artist as well as in the world around him.

Daniel Aaron offers the opinion that "West's image of a tortured demented world grew out of a deep personal anguish and that in the dislocations of society he found

31. "Nathanael West," Kenyon Review, XXIII (1961), 611.

the symbols of his private state."³² This is not the sort of opinion that can be positively substantiated. It is, however, an opinion that I share on the evidence of his life and his work. For anyone who is able to accept this opinion, the work holds a special poignancy:

. . . there isn't a stretch of self-pity in The Day of the Locust, though it is derived from an experience of Hollywood that must have been up to his ears. . . . There is so much gusto in his satire, so much taste for the very thing he was destroying, that he achieved in this book a kind of serenity, as a man will when his love and hate work together.³³

Finally, West's purpose in The Day of the Locust may be illuminated by contrast with F. Scott Fitzgerald's unfinished Hollywood novel, The Last Tycoon. Fitzgerald was interested in Hollywood primarily as a special place, harboring people with problems that could only be fostered by the cinema industry. Furthermore, he was interested in observing the rise and fall of a real, but unusually heroic figure, the producer Stahr. The Last Tycoon is, then, a realistic evocation of an exotic place that Fitzgerald knew intimately. In The Day of the Locust, on the other hand, Hollywood becomes a vehicle for West's imagination, an apt landscape for the dramatization of West's personal and social pessimism.

32. Aaron, p. 636.

33. Rosenfeld, p. 110.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS

The most important conclusions in this study are those drawn in each of the preceding chapters. In a close critical study the examination of individual works in detail is necessarily of primary importance. Nevertheless, there are, I believe, valid generalizations to be made about West's work as a whole.

There is no amelioration of the pessimism in any of West's novels. In Miss Lonelyhearts and The Day of the Locust compassion is more evident than in Balso Snell or A Cool Million, but he never offers a positive statement of a way in which life might be made worth living. In Balso Snell he systematically debunks man's illusions. In Miss Lonelyhearts he runs a controlled experiment and demonstrates that man's greatest dream of perfection is the fruit of a psychosexual complex. Even his "protest novel," A Cool Million, does not go beyond protest to the working out of a solution. The Day of the Locust depicts the disintegration of society and the individual.

West's nihilism is reinforced by his comedy. This comedy is not really uniform. It is adolescent in Balso, mocking in Lonelyhearts, burlesque in A Cool Million, and

compassionate in The Day. It is always, however, negative, destructive. It is always effective, but it is not so much a talent as a compulsion. One wonders if West took any pleasure whatsoever in his writing. Would not the pleasure of writing well have eased the intensity of his despair?

West's nihilism is so thorough, so comprehensive, so intense, so pervasive, because he found the same chaos within the individual that he found in the world of the jazz age and the depression. In the world that people share with one another, he found artificiality to be the rule. This artificiality manifested itself in personal illusions, social practices, language, mannerisms, religion, art, women's make-up--all the facades humanity employs to hide the fact that life, in West's view, is empty, that all value and meaning are created by the mind out of whole cloth. For another man this emptiness might have seemed a warrant to create its own kingdom of values. To West, such creation was self-delusion. In the heart of the individual he found a schizophrenic juggling of illusions and reality; universally, he uncovered sexual frustrations. Sadist, masochist, homosexual, cripple--every character from Balso Snell to Tod Hackett is sexually unhappy. There is no young love, no conjugal bliss. West's perception of artificiality motivated his satire; his intuition of sexual frustration moved him to compassion.

West's narrative technique does not vary greatly in the four novels. All are told through a very mobile third person. All are constructed out of short, highly pictorial scenes. In varying degrees, each exercises West's penchant for particularization. His descriptions are surrealistic largely in the sense that he deals in the unlikely image, the image so special that it could never enter into common usage (for example, "the wave-against-a-wharf smack of rubber on flesh"). More often than not, unlike characters are opposed in the novels, heightening the tension and functioning, as I have shown, through a negative dialectic. All the novels pose certain unique problems, but I have discussed these in the earlier chapters. The great secret of West's style, as simple as the observation may seem, is that he was an inordinately diligent worker. He applied layer upon layer of prose, as certain painters apply layer upon layer of oils. He did not stop until the scene was as alive with salient particulars as he could make it. This is not a sine qua non of good writing--Hemingway, for instance, often skimps on details--but it allowed West's unusual imagination to build upon itself.

Victor Comerchero has attempted to sketch a character called "Westian Man,"¹ a projection of West's subjectivity, into which outline he believes almost all

1. Victor Comerchero, "Nathanael West: The Tuning Fork," (unpubl. diss., Iowa, 1961), p. 244.

of his male characters (Pitkin excluded) roughly fit. This man is pathetic but not sympathetic, ineffectual, frustrated by his attempt to transcend the limitations imposed by society and his own abilities, conscious of external chaos and of his own entrapment, addicted to role-playing, self-deprecatory, and violent. These characters are, presumably, psychologically unconvincing but dramatically effective. I favor Comerchero's thesis that West's characters are largely products of introspection, rather than observation. Nevertheless, "Westian Man" does not seem to me to encompass his male characters. Abe, for instance, is not self-deprecatory; Tod is certainly sympathetic; Homer does not aspire to transcendence; and Miss Lonelyhearts does not play roles. It seems better to think in such terms of multiple personality as form a psychological basis for Steppenwolf. Hesse works on the assumption that the many personalities within each of us are by no means unified. West's men may share more similarities than Hesse's, but there is no reason to force them all into a single mold.

James Light propounds a theory that each of West's novels is in the form of a quest, one which always culminates in disillusionment and which is the result of West's rejection of his Jewishness.² He goes to the sociologist, Will Herberg, for evidence that this is a

2. James F. Light, Nathanael West: An Interpretative Study (Evanston, 1961), pp. 131-138.

common phenomenon among second-generation Jews. He points to West's unpublished story, "Western Union Boy," an autobiographical incident in which the hero finds himself chased by a mob. He recalls West's love of Ulysses, with its questing Jewish outsider, Bloom. He quotes Hesse to the effect that the living hell occurs when "two ages, two cultures and religions overlap." He concludes that, "It is more than likely, therefore, that the reason West's novels are involved in the Quest is his rejection of a heritage, both familial and racial, that burdened West just as Joyce's heritage weighed on that great nay sayer."³ There is no doubt in my mind that West's rejection of Jewishness contributed to the pessimism of his novels. But the fact remains that West's characters are not driven by racial ambiguities but by sexuality.

All of West's novels end in catastrophe: the death of the spirit, a martyrdom, an assassination, and madness, personal and collective. Is this melodrama? The intensity of West's nihilism does not seem to offer any alternative endings. Taken together, the endings of West's novels serve as the ultimate confirmation of West's theme that life is intolerable.

How has this well-wrought nihilism been received by readers and critics? I have given a sampling of the

3. Ibid., p. 136.

responses to the individual novels. William White has sketched the history of West's reputation.⁴ He recalls that West always had a following of perceptive critics. As shown, Malcolm Cowley, Edmund Wilson, and William Carlos Williams, among others, wrote appreciations of West's work during his lifetime. Nevertheless, sales of all of West's books were poor. White considers the newspaper accounts of West's death a good index to his reputation:

The news account in The Times seems to characterize Nathanael West's reputation in 1940: the spelling of his name is wrong (twice), his age is incorrect, of his three novels listed two have errors in their titles, he did not write several plays with Shrank; furthermore, his wife is featured in both headlines and gets more space than he does, and the story of their deaths appeared on the amusements and movie page.⁵

West's fame grew very gradually. In 1942 a biographical entry was included in Twentieth Century Authors, edited by Stanley Kunitz and Howard Haycroft. Four years later, Mademoiselle Coeur-Brise was published in Paris by Editions du Sagittaire. That same year New Directions brought out Miss Lonelyhearts in its New Classics series. This publication elicited Daniel Aaron's critical piece, "The Truly Monstrous: A Note on Nathanael West," in Partisan Review.⁶ This was one of the most

4. "A Novelist Ahead of His Time: Nathanael West," Today's Japan, VI (January 1961), pp. 55-64.

5. Ibid., p. 60.

6. XIV (February 1947), 98-106.

influential reviews of West's work. A British edition of Lonelyhearts appeared in 1949, and by 1950 the first New Classics edition was sold out and another was printed. In 1955 Avon printed 190,000 copies of the novel at thirty-five cents a copy. It was at last a genuine financial success.

Meanwhile, The Day of the Locust had been reprinted by New Directions in 1950 in two printings of 5,000 copies each. This edition, which included the informative introduction by Richard Gehman, provoked influential reviews by Daniel Aaron, Budd Schulberg, Isaac Rosenfeld, Wallace Markfield, and William Carlos Williams.⁷ A British edition appeared in 1951. In 1952 Bantam printed 250,000 copies and, in 1957, another 250,000.

In 1957 all four of West's novels became available in the one-volume Complete Works published by Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy. West's picture appeared on the cover of the Saturday Review and he was hailed almost unanimously in the reviews as a lost-and-found minor genius. Now, in 1964, West criticism includes James Light's book, Stanley Edgar Hyman's monograph, Victor Comerchero's

7. Aaron, "Waiting for the Apocalypse," Hudson Review, III (Winter 1951), 634-636; Schulberg, "Feeble Bodies, Disordered Minds," New York Times Book Review, LV (October 10, 1950), 4; Rosenfeld, "Faulkner and Contemporaries," Partisan Review, XVIV (1950), 106-114; Markfield, "From the Underbelly," The New Leader, XXXIII (November 27, 1950), 25; Williams, "The Day of the Locust," Tomorrow, X (November 1950), 58-59.

dissertation, William White's bibliography, and an increasing number of critical articles and master's theses. New Directions has issued a paperback combining Miss Lonelyhearts and The Day of the Locust. Reviewers compare new novels to West's. An increasing number of young men and women discover West early in their reading careers. And in the universities, West is increasingly the subject of formal study.

Why has it taken so long for West's reputation to become reasonably established? What qualities in his writing provoked such resistance among American readers?

The most important reason for West's lack of popularity has been the harshness of his pessimism. Alan Ross comments on the incompatibility of West's honesty with the American genius for optimism:

West's slightness of reputation is not easy to understand, for Miss Lonelyhearts and The Day of the Locust rank almost with any novels that came out of America in the thirties--more condensed, penetrating and poetic than many, that with much larger scope and subsequent recognition, purported to give the lie to the American scene.

Perhaps the ruthlessness of West's portrait, his making of the whole political and economic racket so undisguisedly repulsive and meaningless, was too near the bone for an American audience with a mass neurosis, and a guilty conscience.⁸

Phillippe Soupault, a former dadaist, concurs in Ross's opinion:

8. Alan Ross, "The Dead Center: An Introduction to Nathanael West," in The Complete Works of Nathanael West (New York, 1957), p. ix.

Nathanael West is probably . . . the writer of his generation who has most willingly accepted being known as an American. He has not looked for excuses, he has not been willing to appeal to the enchantments of landscapes, to local color, or to the delusions of the subconscious. He is as straightforward as an arrow and as direct as a scalpel. At the same time that his contemporaries, the writers of the lost generation, never hesitated to say too much, West never wanted to say enough. When one spoke to him, or when he wrote, one had the impression that he imparted only what he believed, not the essential, but the most significant. . . .

Thus West has proposed to the men of his time--and this is, in my opinion, what gives his work all its importance--to be dupes of nothing. Now, in the United States, more than in any other country, one risks letting himself be taken ceaselessly by the deceptions of a happy civilization, but one which is built on appearances. There exists a sort of command for happiness. It is, moreover, written into the Constitution of the United States. He who is unhappy is suspect. Almost all the American novelists, even if they do not acknowledge it, have started from this principle, that one is born to be happy. Nathanael West has flatly denied this principle.⁹

I cannot think of any other American writer who has promised "neither joy, nor love, nor light, nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain." Melville reaches some degree of affirmation in Billy Budd. Twain never entirely lost his affection for life on the Mississippi. Hemingway wipes the slate clean of the old illusions, but he discovers certain values--courage, commitment, the life of the senses--in experience. Faulkner implies that the world was better once and thus can be made better again. Both The Sound and the Fury and The Day of the Locust end

9. Quoted and translated by Light, p. 188.

with the protagonist howling. But Benjy's voice is the fundamental human response that somehow prevails over the chaotic sound and fury of life, while Tod Hackett's voice merely echoes the madness within him and outside of him. Dos Passos, Farrell, Steinbeck are committed to the possibility of progress; Steinbeck is sometimes downright pastoral. Henry Miller believes in laughter; Thomas Wolfe believes in himself. O'Hara cherishes memories. Fitzgerald upholds the dignity of the defeated. West, on the other hand, trusts in nothing. One cannot infer from his novels any reason why life is better than death. The endings, in fact, imply the contrary.

Nevertheless, although West's pessimism was unusually extreme, it was not, as James Light has shown, basically counter to the main stream of American literature:

A major vein of American creative writing asserts the horrors that some authors have perceived. Often these writers were troubled by the same nightmare that perturbed West: the dual nature of man and the resultant quest. Melville, for instance, is obsessed, in one form or another, with "chronometricals," or heavenly time, as opposed to "horologicals" or earthly time; and when Pierre tries to live by chronometrical time and ideals, he is soon destroyed by a world incapable of rising beyond expediency and horological ideals. Twain constantly rails at man, who is merely animal but who creates his own misery by his invention of some higher "moral nature" at which to aim. Hemingway envisions peace in the "high, cold, dry" country of Switzerland, a world seemingly of "peace" and "service," but the death of Catherine in this apparently spiritual world makes Lt. Henry aware that there is really no more peace in Switzerland than in the chaos of the retreat from

Caporetto. . . . Man's dangling forever in the nightmare between the dream and the fact constantly tormented Eugene O'Neill.¹⁰

West differs from these writers in that his tragic vision was less complex, more concentrated.

West shared with his contemporaries the mystique of violence. In an article in Contact, he analyzed this American pre-occupation:

Is there any meaning in the fact that almost every manuscript we receive has violence for its core? They come to us from every state in the Union, from every type of environment, yet their highest common denominator is violence. It does not necessarily follow that such stories are the easiest to write or that they are the first subjects that young writers attempt. Did not sweetness and light fill the manuscripts rejected, as well as accepted, by the magazines before the war, and Art those immediately after it? We did not start with the ideas of printing tales of violence. We now believe that we would be doing violence by suppressing them.

In America violence is idiomatic. Read our newspapers. To make the front page a murderer has to use his imagination, he also has to use a particularly hideous instrument. Take this morning's paper: FATHER CUTS SON'S THROAT IN BASEBALL ARGUMENT. It appears on an inside page. To make the first page, he should have killed three sons and with a baseball bat instead of a knife. Only liberality and symmetry could have made this daily occurrence interesting.

What is melodramatic in European writing is not necessarily so in American writing. For a European writer to make violence real, he has to do a great deal of careful psychology and sociology. He often needs three hundred pages to motivate one little murder. But not so the American writer. His audience has been prepared

10. Light, p. 191.

and is neither surprised nor shocked if he omits artistic excuses for familiar events. When he reads a little book with eight or ten murders in it, he does not necessarily condemn the book as melodramatic. He is far from the ancient Greeks, and still further from those people who need the naturalism of Zola or the realism of Flaubert to make writing seem "artisticaly /sic/ true."¹¹

West, then, shares in the pessimism and violence of American writing, but he is differentiated from other American writers by the extremity of his negativism. If his techniques are without predecessors in American literary history, that is probably because his wide reading was concentrated on foreign authors. As I have mentioned in the first chapter and elsewhere, his favorites were Dostoevsky, Joyce, Flaubert, and Baudelaire, and he was thoroughly acquainted at an early age with other French and Russian literature.¹² Among other Europeans in his reading were Huysmans, Machen, Verlaine, Rimbaud, AE, Padraic Colum, James Stephens, Arthur Symons, Eliphas Levi, Max Beerbohm, Anatole France and the Greek tragic poets. His stay in Paris and his interest in European painting also contributed to the European flavor of his work. The European writer that West is most like in tone and most unlike in technique is Celine. I do not think there is any question of influence here, but the two strains of

¹¹. Nathanael West, "Some Notes on Violence," Contact, I (October 1932), 132-133.

¹². James Light traces West's reading in detail. See especially p. 8 and pp. 24-28.

pessimism seem to have sprouted up almost simultaneously.

According to C. Carroll Hollis,

Journey to the End of Night and Death on the Installment Plan may outdo West in their scatological detail, but there is the same savage disgust with sexual violence, that sole remnant of the life force in the contemporary world. Celine's hero moves blindly from one disastrous experience to another, encountering the destruction of everything he touches. His conclusions, that the race of man is now made up of the maliciously depraved, the primitives, and the insane, is almost true for West. The difference is that West has found that sufficient torture of the ex-Christian will force him back to a faith which the world may call insane but for which he can die.¹³

I cannot accept Hollis's interpretation of Miss Lonelyhearts as an affirmation of mysticism. Nevertheless, with Hollis's reservation removed, West's disgust with sexual violence even more closely approximate Celine's. West debunks the idealization of man and of love. Celine does likewise in the following conversation from his first novel:

"Bardamu," he said to me then, gravely and a little sadly, "our fathers were as good as us; you mustn't speak of them in this way. . . ."

"You're right, Arthur, you're right there. Venomous yet docile, outraged, robbed, without guts and without spirit, they were as good as us all right. You certainly said it! Nothing really changes. Habits, ideas, opinions, we change them not at all, or if we do, we change them so late that it's no longer worth while. We are born loyal and we die of it. Soldiers for nothing, heroes to all the world, monkeys with a

13. C. Carroll Hollis, "Nathanael West and the 'Lonely Crowd,'" Thought, XXXIII (Spring 1958), 401.

gift of speech, a gift which brings us suffering; when we misbehave, it tightens its hold on us. We have its fingers always round our throats, which makes it difficult to talk; you have to be careful, if you want to be able to eat. . . . The merest slip and you're strangled. . . . Life's not worth living. . . ."

"But there is still love, Bardamu!"

"Love, Arthur, is a poodle's chance of attaining the infinite, and personally I have my pride," I answered him.¹⁴

I have noted that all of West's novels seem to imply that death is preferable to life. Celine's hero, Bardamu, declares, "When one's in this world, surely the best thing one can do, isn't it, is to get out of it?"¹⁵ This recalls Baudelaire's prose poem, "Anywhere Out of This World," and Shrike's monologue on escapes which is presumably based on that poem. Celine also shared West's concern with that dream factory, Hollywood:

Then dreams waft upwards in the darkness to join the mirages of silver light. They are not quite real, the things that happen on the screen; they stay in some wide, troubled domain meant for the poor, for dreams and for dead men. You have to hurry to stuff yourself with those dreams, so as to get through the life which is waiting for you outside, once you've left the theatre, so as to last through a few more days of this strife with men and things. You choose from among these dreams those that will warm your heart the most. For me, I must admit, it was the dirty ones that did. It's no good being proud, you've got to take from a miracle whatever you can hold. A blonde with unforgettable neck and nipples saw fit to break the silence of the screen with a

14. Louis-Ferdinand Celine, Journey to the End of the Night, trans. by John H. P. Marks (New York, 1960), p. 4.

15. Ibid., p. 56.

song about her loneliness. I could well have wept with her.¹⁶

West and Celine agreed that life was not worth living. They made their point in different ways, West in concentration, Celine in effusion.

I have tried to clarify West's unique position as an American author. What can be said of his relationship to later writers? It is not possible to trace his influence on them with any great precision. It can certainly be asserted that West anticipated many current trends in the novel. James Light argues that West pursued an ordered universe in much the way that many current Jewish writers do:

Though the idea can easily be carried to absurdity, the need for order that is present in West's fiction is also at the center of much modern Jewish fiction. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye is dominated by Holden Caulfield's need for moral order in the universe; the absence of this order is suggested by the omnipresent obscenity that Holden feels obliged to erase wherever he can. In his plays, Arthur Miller preaches, sometimes a little stridently, the need for a world of cooperative harmony and human dignity; but what Miller sees, and agonizes over, is a world of chaos, a zoo, in which the human animals struggle viciously to destroy one another. More obviously the need for order is dramatized in the middlebrow novels of Herman Wouk; The Caine Mutiny and Marjorie Morningstar are basically indictments of those bohemian men of air, those Noel Airmen, who would disrupt order by violating convention or questioning the right of some supreme naval commander. For those with higher brows, Saul Bellow's Dangling Man

16. Ibid., p. 201.

dramatizes an anti-hero who, in time of war, seems suspended midway between existence and non-existence, war and peace; such an anti-hero, therefore, seems to dangle, forever waiting, in a world without focus or center or pattern. In another of Bellow's novels, Henderson the Rain King, the hero, though more dynamic, is at first lost in the maze of American civilization. In his heart there arises constantly the cry, "I want, I want," and to still this cry he goes to Africa on a "quest" (the word is Henderson's).¹⁷

West's nihilism might very well be equated with that Absurdity which, since Camus, has been a dominant theme in fiction as well as the theatre:

The hallmark of this attitude is that the certitudes and unshakable basic assumptions of former ages have been swept away, that they have been tested and found wanting, that they have been discredited as cheap and somewhat childish illusions. The decline of religious faith was masked until the Second World War by the substitute religions of faith in progress, nationalism, and various totalitarian fallacies. All this was shattered by the war. By 1942, Albert Camus was calmly putting the question why, since life had lost all meaning, man should not escape in suicide.¹⁸

West's nihilism is certainly a more prevalent attitude in the fiction of our day than it was in the fiction of his own. His style, however, being unique, is not to be imitated. But it is admissible to assert that West anticipated the pre-occupation with prose style that we find in the work of Updike, Styron, Capote, Salinger,

17. Light, pp. 136-137.

18. Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd (Garden City, N. Y., 1961), p. xviii.

Malamud, Roth, and others. Today's writers, like West, seem to publish less often and to write with more attention to diction and phrasing than did, for example, the generation of the thirties. It is a genius for particularization very similar to West's that has built J. D. Salinger's reputation. West catalogues the contents of a Hollywood studio; Salinger inventories the Glass family's medicine cabinet.

Unless we weigh our literature in the most literal sense, West is, it seems to me, a major, not a minor, author. He embodied a clear and consistent vision in an art that admits few flaws. His early death was regrettable, but his work does not strike one as incomplete.

REFERENCES

- Aaron, Daniel. "The Truly Monstrous: A Note on Nathanael West," Partisan Review, XIV (February 1947), 98-106.
- _____. "Waiting for the Apocalypse," Hudson Review, III (Winter 1951), 634-636.
- _____. Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism. New York, 1961.
- Auden, W. H. The Dyer's Hand and other essays. New York, 1963.
- Balakian, Anna. Literary Origins of Surrealism: A New Mysticism in French Poetry. New York, 1947.
- Bird, George. "Translator's Note" to F. M. Dostoevsky, The Double: A Poem of St. Petersburg. London, 1957.
- Bittner, William. "Catching Up with Nathanael West," Nation, CLXXXIV (May 4, 1957), 394-396.
- Breit, Harvey. "Go, West," New York Times Book Review, LXII (March 24, 1957), 8.
- Britten, Florence Haxton. "Grotesquely Beautiful Novel," New York Herald Tribune Books, IX (April 30, 1933), 6.
- _____. "Youth Against Age in Recent Leading Fiction," New York Herald Tribune Books, X (July 1, 1934), 8-9.
- Brown, Bob. "Go West, Young Writer!" Contempo, III (July 25, 1933), 4-5.
- Caldwell, Erskine. Advertisement for Miss Lonelyhearts, Contempo, III (May 15, 1933), 2.
- _____. Call It Experience: The Years of Learning How To Write. New York, 1951.

- Celine, Louis-Ferdinand. Journey to the End of the Night.
Translated by John H. P. Marks. New York, 1960.
- Chamberlain, John. "Books of the Times," New York Times,
June 19, 1934, p. L17.
- Coates, Robert M. Advertisement for Miss Lonelyhearts,
Contempo, III (May 15, 1933), 7.
- _____. "Messiah of the Lonely Hearts," New Yorker, IX (April 15, 1933), 59.
- Cohen, Arthur. "Nathanael West's Holy Fool," Commonweal,
LXIV (June 15, 1956), 276-278.
- Comerchero, Victor. "Nathanael West: The Tuning Fork."
Unpublished Ph. D dissertation, State University
of Iowa, 1961.
- Cowley, Malcolm. "Introduction" to Miss Lonelyhearts, New
York, 1959, pp. ii-iv and 96.
- Esslin, Martin. The Theatre of the Absurd. Garden City,
New York, 1961.
- Fiedler, Leslie A. The American Scholar, XXV (Autumn
1956), 478.
- Flores, Angel. "Miss Lonelyhearts in the Haunted Castle,"
Contempo, III (July 25, 1933), 1.
- G/aroffolo/, N. G. "The Dream Life of Balso Snell,"
Contempo, I (August 21, 1931), 3.
- Gehman, Richard B. "Introduction" to The Day of the Locust, New York, 1950, ix-xxiii.
- Hammett, Dashiell. Advertisement for Miss Lonelyhearts,
Contempo, III (May 15, 1933), 7.
- Herbst, Josephine. Advertisement for Miss Lonelyhearts,
Contempo, III (May 15, 1933), 7.
- _____. "Miss Lonelyhearts: An Allegory,"
Contempo, III (July 25, 1933), 4.
- _____. "Nathanael West," Kenyon Review, XXIII
(1961), 611-630.

- Hollis, Carroll C. "Nathanael West and the 'Lonely Crowd,'" Thought, XXXIII (1958), 398-416.
- Hyman, Stanley Edgar. Nathanael West. Minneapolis, 1962.
- Joyce, James. A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. New York, 1928.
- Light, James F. Nathanael West: An Interpretative Study. Evanston, Ill., 1961.
- Lokke, V. L. "A Side Glance at Medusa: Hollywood, the Literature Boys, and Nathanael West," Southwest Review, XLVI (1961), 35-45.
- Markfield, Wallace. "From the Underbelly," The New Leader, XXXIII (November 27, 1950), 25.
- Matthews, T. S. "A Gallery of Novels," New Republic, LXXIX (July 18, 1934), 271.
- _____. "Novels--A Fortnight's Grist," New Republic, LXXIV (April 26, 1933), 314-315.
- Milburn, George. "The Hollywood Nobody Knows," Saturday Review of Literature, XX (May 20, 1939), 14-15.
- "'Miss Lonelyhearts' and Some Other Recent Works of Fiction," New York Times Book Review, XXXVII (April 23, 1933), 6.
- Motherwell, Robert, ed. The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology. New York, 1951.
- Olson, Charles. "Projective Verse," in Donald M. Allen, ed., The New American Poetry: 1945-1960. New York, 1960, p. 387-390.
- Perelman, S. J. "Nathanael West: A Portrait," Contempo, III (July 25, 1933), 1, 4.
- Pedhoretz, Norman. "A Particular Kind of Joking," New Yorker, XXXIII (May 18, 1957), 144-153.
- Ratner, Marc L. "'Anywhere Out of This World': Baudelaire and Nathanael West," American Literature, XXXI (1960), 456-463.
- Raymond, Marcel. From Baudelaire to Surrealism. New York, 1950.

- Rosenfeld, Isaac. "Faulkner and Contemporaries," Partisan Review, XIV (1950), 106-114.
- Ross, Alan. "The Dead Center: An Introduction to Nathanael West," in The Complete Works of Nathanael West. New York, 1957, pp. ix-xxii.
- "Rubbing Off the Sheen," Newsweek, XLIX (May 13, 1957), 127.
- Salomon, Louis B. "California Grotesque," Nation, CXLIX (July 15, 1939), 78-79.
- Schulberg, Budd. "Feeble Bodies, Disordered Minds," New York Times Book Review (October 10, 1950), 4.
- "Shorter Notices," Nation, CXXXIX (July 25, 1934), 112.
- Smith, Roger H. "SR's Spotlight on Fiction: 'The Complete Works of Nathanael West,'" Saturday Review of Literature, XL (May 11, 1957), 13-14.
- Spengler, Oswald. The Decline of the West: Form and Actuality. New York, 1926.
- _____. The Decline of the West: Perspectives of World History. New York, 1957.
- Stekel, Wilhelm. Auto-Erotism: A Psychoanalytic Study of Onanism and Neurosis. Translated by Louise Brink. New York, 1950.
- _____. Sadism and Masochism: The Psychology of Hatred and Cruelty. Translated by Louise Brink. New York, 1939.
- Swan, Michael. "New Novels," New Statesman and Nation, XXXVIII (August 6, 1949), 153-154.
- Tibbetts, A. M. "The Strange Half-World of Nathanael West," Prairie Schooner, XXXIV (1960), 8-14.
- Troy, William. "Four Newer Novelists," Nation, CXXXVI (June 14, 1933), 672-673.
- West, Nathanael. "Business Deal," Americana, I (October 1933), 14-15.
- _____. "Christmass [sic] Poem," Contempo, III (February 21, 1933), 4.

- _____. The Complete Works of Nathanael West.
New York, 1957.
- _____. A Cool Million or, The Dismantling of
Lemuel Pitkin. New York, 1934.
- _____. The Day of the Locust. New York, 1939.
- _____. The Dream Life of Balso Snell. New York,
1931.
- _____. Miss Lonelyhearts. New York, 1933.
- _____. "Soft Soap for the Barber," New Republic,
LXXXI (November 1934), 23.
- _____. "Some Notes on Miss Lonelyhearts,"
Contempo, III (May 15, 1933), 1, 2.
- _____. "Some Notes on Violence," Contact, I
(October 1932), 132-133.
- White, William. "A Bibliography of Nathanael West,"
Studies in Bibliography (University of Virginia),
XI, 207-225.
- _____. "A Novelist Ahead of His Times: Nathanael
West," Today's Japan, VI (1961), 55-64.
- Williams, William Carlos. Autobiography. New York, 1951.
- _____. "The Day of the Locust," Tomorrow, X
(November 1950), 58-59.
- _____. "Sordid? Good God!" Contempo, III
(July 25, 1933), 5, 8.
- Wilson, Edmund. "Postscript" to The Boys in the Back
Room: Notes on California Novelists. San
Francisco, 1951, pp. 67-72.
- Wilson, T. C. "American Humor," Saturday Review of
Literature, IX (May 13, 1933), 589.
- Valery, Paul. Selected Writings. New York, 1950.
- Volpe, Edmund L. "The Waste Land of Nathanael West,"
Renascence, XIII (1961), 69-77, 112.